

# the third alternative



TTA10 · spring 96

£2.50

profile:

Joyce Carol Oates

'The Matter  
of the Heart'  
Nicholas Royle

other extraordinary fiction:

Mike O'Driscoll

Mark McLaughlin

Chris Kenworthy

Jeff VanderMeer

& many more

comment:

Rick Cadger

featured artist:

Liam Kemp

## THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

Issue 10 · Spring 1996

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# Editorial

Ten issues. Something of a milestone? I don't think so really. It's been skin-of-the-teeth stuff getting this far, that's for sure, but our sights have always been set on farther horizons.

Getting there is proving both thrilling and frustrating. The greatest thrill is having the privilege to publish some outstanding fiction and artwork, especially from talented newcomers, some of whom are clearly destined for great things. Can't get it right *all* the time though, and it's frustrating that it can take a while for changes and stricter editorial standards to filter through to the finished product. One of these changes arrives with this issue: it is the last to feature poetry, unless of course we're faced with a huge public outcry. I don't expect one though, as I'm sure most of you are here for the fiction. The amount of poetry we've published has been minuscule anyway, and there are so many places you can go for a bigger, better fix.

Rick Cadger's *The Unquiet Soul* column, as mentioned last time, also makes its debut here. Please don't take Rick's request for feedback lightly: with input this could develop into something much more than just a good comment column. Further expansion on the non-fiction front still to come.

Another source of frustration is that even rave reviews don't translate into extra sales. What you get is extra manuscripts, and we're receiving quite a few more of those lately. Could be coincidence, but it might also be due to the extra attention caused by *Last Rites & Resurrections*, even though critical reaction has ranged far more than it ever has for the magazine from which the stories are selected: from extremely flattering to downright bizarre (the *Varsity* reviewer ignored

the stories and reviewed the contributors' notes). But while it's a shame all these manuscripts aren't accompanied by subscription cheques, it's good to get them nonetheless. Getting *none* would be a pretty damning indictment, wouldn't it. Besides, just think of the thrills they might contain...

## COMING SOON

Extraordinary new stories by Conrad Williams, Martin Simpson, Justina Robson, James Miller, other TTA favourites and debutantes... plus artwork from JK Potter and Allen Ashley's 'The Planet Suite'.

TTA11 is published on August 1st. Don't miss it!

Relatively little feedback after TTA9, at least in terms of letters of comment. Hope that's just complacency. Coincidentally, however, a couple of people have mentioned an art portfolio publishing project I apparently proposed a while back, something I'd completely forgotten about. So, in your rush to renew your subscriptions, let me know if you'd be interested in such a thing. Talking of subscriptions, don't forget to make your cheques out to 'TTA Press' and not 'The Third Alternative' (or 'Zene' for that matter), despite what you may see on old adverts or flyers. I'm desperate to close those accounts. Bank charges are bad enough without having to pay them three times over! May I also take this opportunity to remind you of the special 'dual subscription' offer. You can get four issues of each magazine for just £15 (Europe £19, RoW £22, USA/Canada \$32, airmail). There has been a slight rise in the Zene subscription, which is now £8 (£10, £12, \$16 [actually cheaper], airmail). TTA prices remain the same. *Damn* good value! □

# The Matter of the Heart

Nicholas Royle

**T**his guy I know, Max, he's always banging on about emotional routes. Believes there are insubstantial but clearly defined thoroughfares all over the city. As if London's traffic problems aren't enough. The guy's an optimist and he's in love, but I listen to what he says. He's been right before. Been wrong too. Christ, has he been wrong.

Reckons his mate Danny started adopting particular routes across town, which he at first assumed were shortcuts. But when he'd been taken home by Danny after enough disappointing parties and tense evenings spent in dodgy pubs on the edge of Hampstead he started to wonder if they really were time-savers. They seemed, if anything, to take longer. Though what did he know? He took cabs everywhere. Or Danny ferried him about. So he checked out his *Streetfinder* one night after Danny had dropped him and he worked out they'd covered at least a couple of miles more than they needed. No problem, but Danny seemed to plot his routes so carefully, surely there had to be some purpose to his navigation.

When he questioned Danny about it one night, his friend just grunted. Made some private hand signal as they flew down Church Lane towards Hornsey. "That's where Kim used to live," he said with a small wave, a surprisingly gentle gesture for such a wiry, highly strung little man. So Kim, whoever he was, didn't even live there any more.

Danny didn't have a name for the routes he took, it was just a practical thing with him, but Max is different. Always has to give names to things. Hence emotional routes.

There's another guy. There's always another guy. An editor. American. Works out of

a booklined log cabin in Deliverance County, North Carolina. Keeps a loaded shotgun by his writing desk. To ward off in-breds and grizzlies. Or so I believed until I checked out his side of the tale. This man mountain, this wild, sun-beaten rock of a man with his crazy beard of scorched desert scrub, lives on an estate rejected by the director of *Edward Scissorhands* as too neat; too suburban for *The Stepford Wives*.

He's yellow this guy. Charlie. The colour of the rye he's been drinking for twenty-five years. The colour of onion-skin — he won't write on anything else.

And there's a woman. A doctor. That's where I come in.

Danny, though, he runs a surprisingly lucrative import/export business in South East Asian pornography. Not heavy stuff necessarily, just stories, erotic blatherings of pent-up Hong Kong Chinese. Occasionally, you know, you wander past an empty shop-front, some old stationer's or newsagent in Store Street that's been empty for a couple of months, and there are these piles of softback books tied up with twine, Chinese characters bristling on garish covers, paper no better than newsprint. Lined up uselessly in the window. Well, they're always Danny's. He'll use the space for a month or two then move everything out of town into an abandoned Thai restaurant down the main drag into Sydenham. If you know Danny, eventually you'll pass by, crawling in a traffic queue, the roads all up between town and the M2, and you'll spot those familiar Oriental bindings. It's how I kept up with Danny in the days before mobile phones. Nowadays when I call him up he's always belting round the South Circular. "I'm in Clapham, you old tart," he'll



shout down the fuzzy line. "Just on my way to a meeting. I'll call you."

He never does, but that's not the point.

He used to work in a pizza restaurant at Hyde Park Corner, next to a deserted hospital. St George's. Before they moved everyone down to Tooting. I couldn't see Danny as a waiter but I guess ten years ago everyone was doing something different. Max told me all about it.

Speaking of Max, he's the rule that proves the exception. He's always been doing the same thing, whether it's ten, fifteen, even twenty years ago. Drifting, his life an unmanned canoe, at the mercy of white rapids, gulleys, cataracts. Then he fell in love. Again. Just recently. He was telling me about it. Met her outside a pub, which seemed unlikely — but you know what they always say, he said to me. I didn't know if I did. Anyway. He came to me for advice. (Believe me, there's a last person you should go to for advice, and he's way ahead of me.) Max had asked her out to dinner and she'd turned everything upside down by saying yes, so now he had to think of somewhere to take her. First off, he had to decide on the kind of food — Indian, Thai, French — the only thing he had to go on was she'd said she didn't like bad Chinese.

"What help is that?" he'd wailed. "Who does like bad Chinese?"

I could think of several places he'd taken me over the years, from hell holes on the Holloway Road to Soho dives, but I kept my mouth shut.

Then he worked out that the key variable was not nationality but location. "If we eat at Lam's, say, or Satay Malaysia, it'll be too close to my house and she'll think I'm trying to lure her back to mine so I can try it on. You know, like she owes me one because I bought her dinner."

So he went out and got the *Time Out Eating and Drinking Guide* and picked out a pretty good-sounding Italian in Shepherd's Bush, but when he checked the map he realised it was about a mile from where she lived. "Obviously she'd think I was angling for an invite and so would either give me the brush-off or feel obliged to invite me back, in which

case I wouldn't want to go back. You know what I mean?"

Well, sort of. Going somewhere in town was no good, he went on, because you're bound to bump into someone you know, either some drunk or an ex-girlfriend.

"Then you've got the whole transport problem. Do you pick somewhere that you can both get to by tube or bus? Or can you assume she's going to drive, or get a cab? It's a minefield. And that bloody guide's no good. Clearly the most important thing is how likely you are to cop off, not whether the meat is barbecued at your table or if they welcome children and take bookings for large parties. What you want to know is, will you cop off? You know, 'cause some places are designed with that and nothing else in mind. All mirrors, black leather and chrome. Others are so fucking functional you might as well drive up the M1 to Toddington services."

What Max needed, he explained, was somewhere in between, where his date wouldn't feel threatened but nor would the surroundings preclude intimacy should it arise.

"There should be a copping-off rating with little condom symbols awarded, you know, from five down to one. Five condoms if it's a dead cert. Four if it's just about worth a packet of three. Two, and you needn't worry if you didn't manage to shower. And one — save your money and have another pint."

They ended up at a fairly expensive Thai place near where she lived. He walked her home and she didn't ask him in — which was fine by him because he'd decided she was too nice to ruin it by going to bed on the first date — and he walked another mile to the tube only to find they'd all finished.

Things progressed — a quick drink and a walk by the canal here, a movie and a curry there — and before you knew it he'd practically moved in. Round there all the time he was, having her cook for him, even putting up a few shelves as if that made it all okay. But there wasn't any problem — it was good for both of them. It still is.

So, anyway, Danny worked in this pizza place next to what was left of St George's.

Me, I know it by the Grenadier pub round the back, but Danny was more kind of 'underground' somehow. He worked hard in the restaurant and got on fine with his colleagues, even kidded around with the posh guys in black ties who worked downstairs in the jazz room. Could be Danny just knew who he should keep in with. But I don't think so. There's no side to him. Never pushes the envelope. Come break time he'd wolf down his pizza — same one every day, even down to the extra olives — and nip upstairs, through the kitchens and out on to the small triangle of roof where everyone went for a fag. You climbed down to a lower level, jumped across a narrow gap, then hauled yourself in through an open fourth floor window of St George's.

I never knew Danny back then, of course, but the way Max tells it, I feel as if I was in that old hospital with him. He'd roam the empty corridors, check out the dusty wards, dally in rubble-strewn labs where forgotten bottles of brightly coloured liquids just demanded to be taken hold of and shaken. He found some kind of fist-sized object on an old lab worktop, couldn't work out what it was, genuinely didn't know if it was an old chamois leather that had hardened and gone mouldy, or an extracted heart that had inexplicably been left lying around. The hospital had been empty for three or four years but it looked as if they'd moved overnight. White coats lay draped over swivel chairs, racks of test tubes had been scattered over black and white tiled floors as if upset in some technician's haste to leave. There were signs up everywhere saying that anyone caught trespassing would be dealt with as if they were a terrorist. "Fuck knows why," Max said to me and I pointed out the old hospital's proximity to the Palace. What possible other reason could there be? Max didn't have a better idea.

Danny never mentioned a girlfriend and was not known to have made any passes at the waitresses, but this new girl started. She was the receptionist and even that was stretching her intellectual capabilities. She was something with a zed in it — Zara, Zoë or

Zas — lived in her own mews flat in Mayfair, thought Marxism-Leninism was a comedy-songwriting duo, but when she bent down to slip her Pall Mall back in her Moschino handbag she gave you an eyeful down the front of her white shirt. Well, she gave Danny an eyeful, and he was hooked. Poor bastard. Within days he was running her around from beauty therapist to elocution tutor in his 1975 leaf-green BMW 2002 ti. Her Merc had been written off in a 360-degree spin off the Hogarth roundabout, she told him. He would only find out later that she didn't drive at all because she wouldn't be 17 for another six months.

They couldn't go back to her place, she explained, because she shared with her sister, who was revising for exams at nursing college. And she didn't know him well enough yet to go back to his. "You could be anybody," she said. "I don't know who you are."

He thought he knew who she was though. He thought he did.

He never expected her to go for it, but decided to suggest they sneak into the old hospital together one night after work. Something in her make-up which he hadn't anticipated, some sleazy, danger-loving smear beneath that Amagansett shirt, jumped at the idea, and they sat across the road in Hyde Park until the manager had locked up and cabbed home for the night. Danny used the keys he'd borrowed off the Yugoslavian busboy to get back into the green-tiled pizza parlour, once part of the hospital's path labs, and they slipped upstairs. Of course, by this stage they could have screwed across a table-for-four or given the cockroaches a hammering underneath the marble dough-rolling slab, but Z was wetting her knickers over the thought of penetrating the forbidden portals of St George's. Danny had told her about the chamois heart and watched her pupils dilate as he described it.

They broke in easily enough and as they slunk down plaster-scarred corridors Danny worried that the security guards whose signs festooned the crumbling walls would spook him and spoil his performance. Z was stopping every other stride to pick up some cob-



webby swab or shattered syringe while Danny placed a light hand on her elbow to urge her along, a packet of three burning a hole in the pocket of his black silk jacket. She leant back against the concertinaed elevator doors and lifted her short black skirt to reveal, even in the clinging shadows, a dark tuft which belied the natural blonde image she'd managed to sell to everyone in the restaurant. Danny's muscles bunched, his knuckles tightening, and he took a step towards her. She grinned and fled, leaving him clutching at air, cursing and twisting to see her pale legs vanishing round the next corner. He was after her, nervous and turned on in about equal measure, and he caught up easily.

"Where're we gonna go?" she whispered.

He took her hand and they climbed a flight of stairs, stepping over lumps of masonry, avoiding jigsaws of broken lampshades, Danny navigating by means of grainy orange light filtered through windows and skylights. They stopped in a room that was small enough to contain their excitement, the ceiling low enough that its shadows were only shallow. Through a series of grimy windows they could hear the incessant grind of traffic round Hyde Park Corner and see the moon reflecting dimly off the top of the Wellington Arch.

There was a cot. Just one. Bare and dusty, stained, musty and damp, but they fell upon it as if it were the most glorious king-sized bed in the hotel suite of their choice. Despite his urgency Danny was the tenderest lover, and Z, whom no one could have called a faker, flung her head back and shrieked God's name as the little man pressed her back on to the scraggy mattress. They made love for an hour, ninety minutes, maybe more, sweat drying on their hungry skins as they rested between bouts. Danny pulled her to the edge of the bed and got to his feet; he acted as a fulcrum between planes of pleasure he wouldn't have guessed existed; he experienced sensation so pure and extreme it registered only as the brightest of white lights. He cried once, very briefly, upon reaching his second orgasm. Z was too far gone to have seen his tears. She was beyond emotion. She was a still lake.

Max, I don't know — he even drew me a map of the emotional routes that led to Danny's night in the old hospital. Paths that crisscrossed each other. To and from her place in Mayfair, when he'd picked her up or given her rides home. Spins up to north London to sit on the grassy slope in front of Alexandra Palace and watch the misty twinklings of the city by night. Destinations that when plotted on a graph showed a distinct pattern, with the low-ceilinged room in St George's at its heart. I don't know if Max was using dodgy maths or if things really did work out like that. He's a weird guy, Max, living his life according to other people's, drawing his experience from theirs. It was Max, obviously, who told me about Charlie, the American editor. He came over to the UK for some bizarre kind of convention. Writers and editors getting together to swap notes, sell stories and get pissed up together. Well, I guess that sounds okay.

So. Charlie hit town for the annual binge and his colleagues were chocked because the guy had turned yellow. As if some reader had tipped up on his North Carolina doorstep with a sledgehammer which Charlie had taken full in the face the moment he opened the door. It was yellow like old bruising, you hoped it would go away. Yeah, like wake up and smell the coffee. It was bruising, all right, but of a different kind. Charlie liked a glass of rye, a big one. For breakfast. His friends were upset and surprised he'd decided still to fly over. "Only went yellow this morning," he announced, running out of puff, beard-stroking in an effort to keep things going.

"Where are you staying?" they asked him, having noticed he wasn't booked into the convention hotel.

He told them about Yvonne. The Fetish Queen. The lady in leather, dominatrix and *Headpress* cover star he'd picked up back home. She needed a little pampering if she was to come to England. The convention shit-hole would no longer do. "I went upmarket," he told them. They'd seen the pictures, the ones the magazine had been allowed to print, and they figured whatever Charlie had to do

to hold on to her was probably worth it. At his age. And, they grimly acknowledged, in his condition. Charlie checked into a fancy new hotel on Hyde Park Corner. Built on the site of the former hospital no less. Constructed, in fact, within and around its actual shell.

Charlie had fallen in love with Yvonne despite their twenty-two-year age difference, in spite of the fact she outlawed sex. It was the first time he'd been in love since 1967 and he didn't care. He cherished her. If it led to something, fine, if not, it'd still be worth it. Just to wake up in the same room, if not the same bed — she'd insisted he book a twin room. Her part of the bargain was simply to be with him at the convention, to sit with him in the bar and talk to his friends, to listen to him give his readings, and stand around while he signed copies of his books. She could handle that. She thought she knew what to expect.

She was wrong.

She stepped into that hotel room with its fine view of the glimmering Wellington Arch, its soundproofing designed to keep the roar of Hyde Park Corner at bay... she stepped into the main room from the bathroom where she'd been freshening up after their first afternoon at the con... and she felt an overpowering wave of compassion for the big, red-bearded, dishevelled man who she knew loved her more than anyone ever had. Charlie was standing to one side of the room, one hand reaching for a bottle of rye, the other scratching his vast chest, and her heart lurched. She didn't want anything to happen to this giant. She saw in a trice his vulnerability as he teetered between bottle and bed. If she felt this she could love him. Before she'd rationalised it any further she was crossing the room to stand before him. She took the bottle out of his hand and put one finger to his astonished lips, and slowly slid it between them.

She undressed him first, then herself. Slowly.

If his heart pumped faster and faster as she made love to him she was not aware of it. Something in the air between them had made her feel she had to give him what she'd

been holding back. She had to give him everything. And she did.

Done, she collapsed on top of him, her own heartbeat returning to normal. She listened for his.

She looked at his florid face.

Reached for the phone.

Dialled 0.

The heart specialist who took care of Charlie was Dr Joanna Mackay. Based at the Hammersmith Hospital. Which for me meant a quick blast down the Westway in my reconditioned Triumph Stag. I was up to speed now on the whole story. Of course, Max has a name for me and what I do. A Chronicler of the Heart, he calls me.

Joanna Mackay was good enough to spend some time with me talking about the case. Talking about Charlie. I felt I'd got to know him before I even met the guy. Which I did as soon as Joanna thought it was wise. She was intrigued by my interest. I pressed her about Charlie. "He'll pull through," she said. "He's strong."

"His heart couldn't take it?" I asked.

"Let's say it wasn't quite prepared."

"Suppose it wasn't entirely a physical thing?" I suggested, but she was too professional to be drawn. She brushed her reddish-brown hair behind her ear, but left a stray lock hanging loose.

I started making regular visits to the Hammersmith, and I'd find myself checking to make sure Joanna was on duty before climbing into the car. I'd go see Charlie, then find out if she was free for a chat. Charlie was making slow but steady progress. Much of the time Yvonne was sitting right there with him, the integrity of her motivation unquestionable. I'd talk with her for a while, but found that I was anxious to get away and catch Joanna before she went off duty.

It may be impossible to pinpoint the moment of the heart's unburdening, but you know when it's taken place. Everything, the whole world, feels different. I don't know what it was that did it: the way her eyes darted when nervous, the still-young bloom of her skin, or the tumble of her hair. Later: her self-



confidence without swagger, her little kindnesses, the complete absence of signs of madness. Her hunger and enthusiasms.

The deck sections of the Westway bumped under the wheels of the old Stag. A track played on the radio two days running, some Europop song, came on at the same time, as I was through the last set of lights on the Marylebone Road and heading on to the Westway. Joanna lived a mile the other side of the A40 from the hospital and the track matched the time it took to get from the start of the Westway to her place. The singer's voice popping like light bulbs in a dark room, stars exploding in deepspace.

To reach the Westway in the first place I would fling the Stag into corners and, while Danny may not have been big on saving time, I found shortcuts I never would have been able to work out had it not been imperative. I found streets that weren't even on the road atlas, its pages thumbled like love letters. The traffic lights became knots on a rope that was pulling me in to where I wanted to be. If it looked too heavy on the Euston Road I'd get off on to Judd Street and weave my way across Gower Street and Tottenham Court Road, not surfacing until I was opposite the Planetarium. I was locked on course, a heat-seeking missile.

I bought the CD and recorded the song on a tape loop.

Flying across town, wheels barely touching the tarmac — one heart to another — I checked the pulse of the city: a white light winking at Canary Wharf. The Telecom Tower's red flash. The lights' intervals were the same. The beating at the heart of the city.

As long as I dragged one side of the Stag through the gutter as I launched it over the speed bumps, and so long as I continued to time my dash past police cameras by the city's heartbeat, I'd be okay. There was a trend just picking up back then for fixing neon lighting under your car and making the road glow mauve, pink, blue, green. Did I need some of that? I don't think so. My emotional route was on fire.

Whatever happens, the Westway will always remain warm to the touch. □

## The Inscrutable World

Rupert Loydell

(after frottages by AC Evans)

*If the world is inscrutable then  
the image will be so too*

— Tarkovsky

The honorary surrealist  
has orchestrated this —  
a morning of sunshine  
and music, an oasis  
in his busy week.

He places drawings  
on a sheet of muslin  
laid on bare boards —  
a table he will feast at,  
a banquet he will not share.

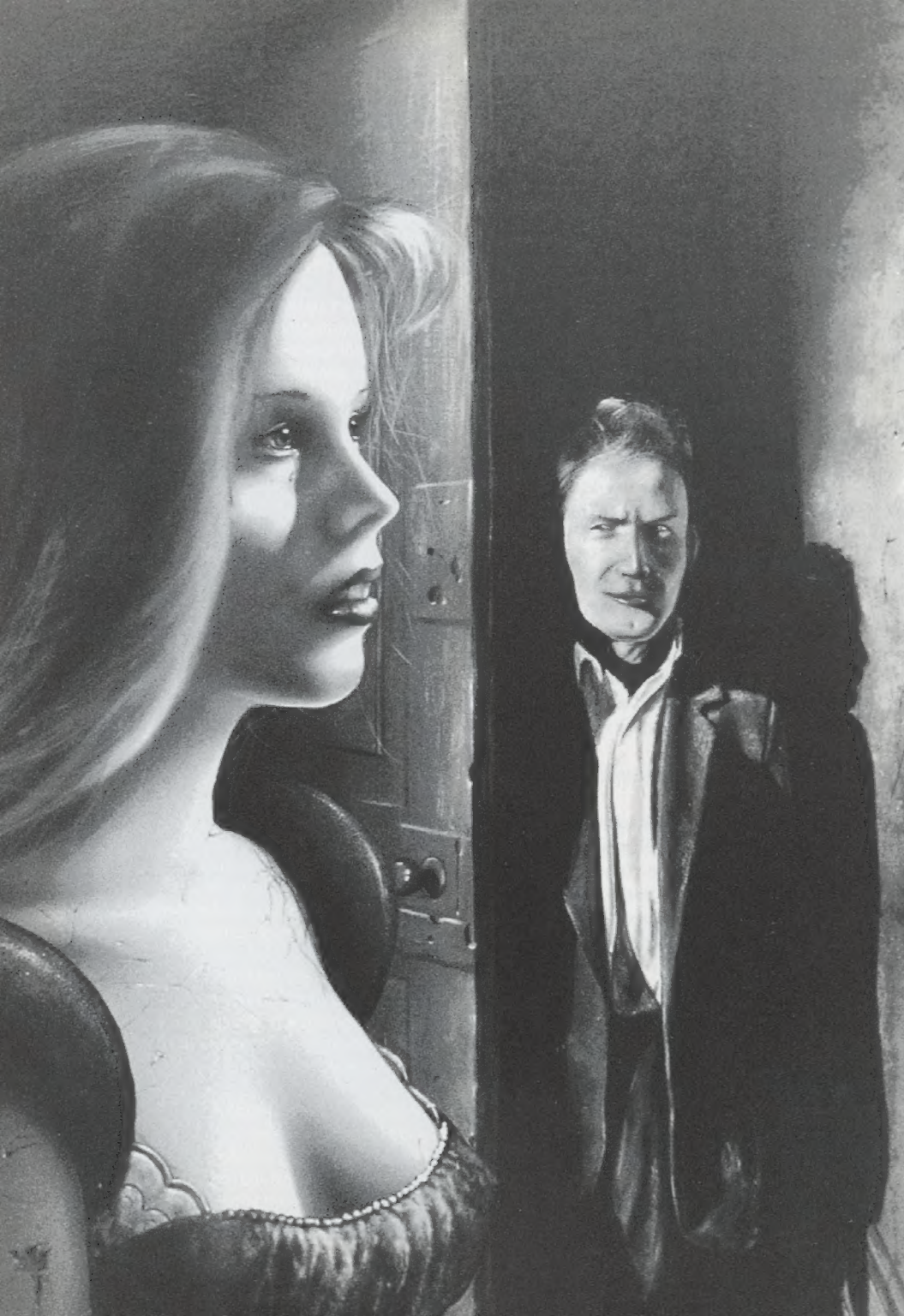
Laid out in a row  
the paper evidence of  
an inscrutable world  
does not help him  
map his journey.

Music spills into the room  
and pretends to clarify,  
to help order and label.  
The singer calls out  
across a web of noise:

bells, accordion, melodica,  
the slow beat of a muffled drum.  
Brief, gentle improvisations, full of  
percussion that chimes and shimmers  
like dust drifting through sunlight.

He circles the make-believe table,  
sucked into a vortex of texture —  
a walnut world imploding on itself,  
a place where silence has rubbed off  
into each and every echo.

The room turns into a shadow  
and a full moon is filtered  
into his mind's empty corridors.  
He silences the music and enters the landscape,  
abandoning the uncertainty of meaning.





# Perfect Skin

Mike O'Driscoll

Once again Dacia Nonyela felt the terrible yearning of his gaze as it fixed on the side of her head. Conscious of his unspecified need, she stared at the crumbs on her plate and pushed them into a pile with her finger.

He threw some words into her space. She flinched, almost missing them. "I see you here every day," was the sound they made. She turned to look at the guy, who smiled and said, "I don't mean I was following you or anything. Just, I couldn't help noticing you."

She lifted the plate to her mouth, made an 'O' with her lips and blew him some crumbs of comfort.

"What does that mean?" he said.

"It means good fortune," she said. It didn't mean that at all; it didn't mean anything.

"Oh, then I guess I should thank you," he said, smiling again. "Can I get you another coffee?"

She nodded and watched as he went to the counter: a white guy in a suit, early thirties she guessed, worked out regular. Ask him what he wants; a quick fuck? Or something else? Even after seven years she still found it hard to participate in the rituals of communication. She could listen real sharp, detect the rhythms and melodies of the street, attune her senses so that she could recognise the different beats of night and day. So what did her senses tell her about him?

He returned with two coffees and said, "Are you Jamaican?"

"African."

"Where in Africa?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. That place was no longer home; it no longer existed, except in memory. Home was here now, this city.

"What do they call you?"

"No one calls me anything."

"You must have a name?"

"I was Dacia."

"Was?"

"Am," she said, because it was easier than trying to explain the absence of identity.

"It's a beautiful name," he said. "Like your skin."

Why? she wondered. Did he think it was blackness that made her beautiful? Was that the crucial, defining fact of her existence? She didn't ask him these things; instead she asked his name.

"I'm Gabriel," he said.

"Like the angel." She considered a moment: what does he have to offer me but his need? Or I him? Such caution had once been alien to her. "What are you looking for?" she said.

"To get to know you."

No; the question was, what did she want to show him? "I have some secrets," she said. "Not many."

Gabriel said, "I'd like us to start with a clean slate."

A chill danced across her flesh. "I have to get back to work."

"You ride a bike? A courier, right? Must be tough in winter?"

She nodded, then slung a backpack over her shoulders. "Really, there's nothing to tell."

"If you start out with nothing, then you have nothing to lose."

"I don't know." Was it wise? She had survived for so long by not being noticed, by erasing her identity. All this time she had believed that knowing who you were or where you were from were superfluous to

survival. To speak of those things was to make them real, to give them power over you. To be silent was a form of freedom.

She stood and walked to the door, and felt the shadow of his longing fall across her back. She spun round to confront him but he was still in his seat.

"I mean it, Dacia," he said. "I want to be your friend."

She had been eighteen months in London; officially, she wasn't there at all. She wondered if it was possible to jump to an assumption? Or were they things you made? Whatever, she jumped.

And said, "Okay."

So, while it wasn't thrown to the wind, she did at least allow caution to flutter in the breeze. She met Gabriel the following day and let him take her for a drink that evening. He was kind and attentive, and he made her laugh. He asked about Africa but she skirted the issue, telling him about Europe instead. It was too soon, she told herself, still too real in her mind. Afterwards he took her home and respected her wishes when she said she didn't want to sleep with him, not yet.

Another night, he told her some things of his own life, of Ireland. "We're the same, Dacia," he said. "Exiles, or nomads perhaps. Has its advantages, I guess. Makes you difficult to pin down."

"To know someone?" she said.

"Not you," Gabriel said, caressing the back of her hand. She stared at this motion, then at his eyes. What did he mean by it? Ought she to withdraw her hand?

She left it there, saying, "Why do you do that?"

"To see what it feels like," he said. "To see if it's real."

"Is it?" she asked, wondering how she would feel if he said no.

"Definitely."

They made love for the first time that night, at his flat in Camden Town. Gabriel was a good lover, Dacia felt, though she didn't come. He was tender and considerate, and afterwards she felt more human than she had done in a long while. She tried to sleep

then, but he wanted to know more about who she was and where she had come from — the things that scared her. "I need to know," he implored. But it wasn't that easy. There was a question of trust; just a month ago, she would not have believed herself capable of trusting anyone ever again. She wondered at his need for enlightenment, and at the strength of her own fear. How would it be not to be afraid?

*Long ago in the time of the red night, a young girl took part in a strange and terrible dance choreographed by pain. Women and children moved at random through the fired shantytown, but a careful observer might have seen patterns emerging from its chaos: a fine tracery of blood across the orange-silver earth; loping shadows contorted with violin screams; rhythms of blood, pulsing madly through delicate skulls; and torched babies stuck on bayonets, bobbing up and down like grotesque puppets.*

*The thunder and lightning of rockets, the lumbering brutality of armoured vehicles, the snarl and spite of machine-guns; these were the instruments used to wipe the slate clean, by which a world was eradicated from a world.*

Dawn was greying the city before she silenced the music of slaughter that trespassed on her dreams.

Once, on the upper deck of Palladin Avenue, Dacia took a spill when a car swerved into her lane. She wasn't hurt bad — just cuts and bruises — but she panicked and fled when someone in the small crowd that had gathered suggested calling an ambulance. There could be no hospital for her, not for a while, not until she'd saved enough to buy papers on the black market. She rode no more that day. Instead, she walked the bike back to her bedsit in Dalston. It had cost the last £800 out of the three grand she'd got for her left kidney, but it would be worth it in the long run. Once she had the right papers, she could start looking for a better place to live.

When Gabriel called round that evening, he wanted to know why she hadn't gone to casualty. She was reluctant to tell him, afraid of the effect her unofficial status might have on their relationship. When she finally told



him, instead of the fear or outrage she had expected, he promised he would do everything in his power to help her get official residency. Dacia insisted that she had it all worked out, how in another few months she would have the five grand needed for a complete set of papers. Gabriel was appalled.

"Are you crazy?" he said. "We'll find a solicitor and go through the proper channels."

She'd heard about proper channels; that's why she'd decided on false papers. "I know what I'm doing, Gabriel."

"This is Britain, not fucking Africa. We have justice here."

She remembered justice. It was justice silenced the world, and kept the horror from its TV screens; it stilled the peacekeeping forces, disbarred them from righting any wrongs; it gagged the historians from recording the passing of a world. "Please," she insisted, "let me do this my way."

They argued half the night, Gabriel relentless in his need to take control. But Dacia had listened and observed; she was learning to speak, to shed the fears that had made her small. She had Gabriel to thank for that, for making her strong enough to resist his will.

At night she travelled in time, forward to endless possibilities, sometimes back to the red night. Living it again gave her power; as did the catharsis of relating the defining moments of her life. She worried what he did with such knowledge, whether he believed what she told him, or if that was all he cared about. Though she was sure of her feelings for him, at times she felt the intensity of his need choking her own desires. She imagined he wanted to live through what she'd lived through, as if that was the only way he could really know her. She couldn't understand why, having done so much to help her create an identity, he seemed to want nothing more than to control it.

In the spring he asked her to move in with him. Dacia thought about it for a day or two, convincing herself that her fears were irrational. When she agreed, Gabriel wanted to organise everything but she insisted she'd do

it herself. It was important that she take this step of her own accord, that she be sure she was doing the right thing.

She had few possessions: clothes — mostly cycling gear — some paperbacks, a walkman and some tapes, toothbrush, a box of tampons, the tattered, bloodstained remnants of a native shawl. Most of her stuff fit into the backpack. The things she had accumulated that she couldn't carry, she left behind. She moved at night, cycling through damp, glistening streets in the early hours, leaving the past behind.

The day she got her papers, she went out for a drink with some friends from work. She wanted them to share her excitement and joy. That was what being human was all about; she remembered that from before. And when Gabriel turned up about eight, she wanted to share her feelings with him too. He kissed her and shook hands with all her friends, but his movements were perfunctory, as if he were going through the motions. As if, Dacia felt, his heart wasn't in it.

At home, she made coffee but Gabriel drank scotch and criticised her friends. She ignored him at first, half amused that they should make him so uneasy, so resentful. Was it her fault that he didn't have the same kind of relaxed relationships with his work colleagues? Was he jealous in some way? But when he called her a dumb, African cunt, she lashed out with her fist, barely catching him on the cheek. Raging, he shoved her backwards so that she fell over the sofa and hit the side of her head on the coffee table. She lay there, dazed and bleeding, then sensed rather than saw him, kneeling beside her, helping her to sit up and swearing that he never meant to call her that, just he was so fucking angry and she had to understand. But a throbbing pain was spreading out from her head, infecting her with weakness and disgust. She stood up and staggered to the bedroom. Ten minutes later, he followed, stripped off and crawled in beside her. He draped an arm over her belly, tangling his fingers in her public hair, his prick stiffening against her thigh. She sat up, facing him, and said, "No," and watched the shame spread across

his drunken features. He tried to say something but the words refused to take shape. He lay down and turned away from her.

*The younger women were raped to death, the older ones tortured till their reluctant flesh surrendered ghosts. Some had their limbs strapped to two vehicles, then were torn apart, others had their stomachs sliced open and live grenades tucked among their organs. Mothers, sisters and young boys died, knowing they had been abandoned by their men. She was raped fifteen times that night, once for each year of her life. Her final assailant said he would end her misery when he was done. But as he heaved himself atop her battered flesh, her dulled, brutalised mind was animated by one final spark of mute, protesting rage. She seized the huge knife from his belt, stuck it in his side and ripped him open like a bag of grain. She lay trapped beneath him and waited to die.*

And woke to find herself pressed face down on the bed, being fucked from behind. Terror seeped into her bones like a disease, as an urgent breath rattled in her ears. The urge to scream was powerful, but silence had saved her in the red night, and it was silence with which she confronted his implacable need. "You ... belong ... to ... me," he insisted, not making love, but taking control of her. Could it be that she had somehow ceded him rights of possession over her flesh? Was this life no more than a shadow memory of one that had already slipped from the world?

It doesn't take much to travel in time; imagination, mostly, and memories. Dacia went to the future and brought back a dreadful echo of the past. She saw a night lying in wait somewhere down the road, a hidden cancer; a night like one she had lived before; a night best forgotten, or never encountered at all. But there were days when she was blind, when she kidded herself that some osmotic process would put their world to rights.

He was drinking more and hadn't worked out in a while. "I want you to quit work," he said.

"What's made you this way, Gabriel?"

"I hardly ever see you anymore."

"That's because you're too drunk."

"I want it to be like it was."

That was the theme that drove him, going back and starting over. "Let's leave the city," he said, but it was too late for that, Dacia knew. The irony was that he *had* helped her to start over, but that in recognising the power she had discovered, he now wanted to take it away. Possessions weren't supposed to have a will of their own.

She felt his eyes on her as she watched an African war on the news, and sensed his need for her to express guilt at having survived. But what she mostly felt was relief that she wasn't there, an extra in that slaughterhouse parade.

That night drawing ever closer, bearing down on her like an immutable prophecy. Indicators sublimated in language, expressions, actions — the way he took her from behind, as if he could no longer bear to look at her face; the way his teeth nipped hungrily at her perfect skin, as if to eat her would be to possess the totality of her being.

*When dawn came she was alive, the only living thing on the face of that scorched earth. Though she had neither wanted nor expected to, she had survived. For that one night her world had been defined by pain and horror, and afterwards it could never be as it was before. The world had known who she was and it had taken and destroyed that person. In the future, she vowed, she would be no one and no one would be safe.*

She screamed, but only in the future. Here, now, she sat up and put a hand against the cooling sweat on her breast, feeling the furious pounding of her heart. In her head she had seen this world; all that was required was to count the hours that made up the days as he worked her like the wind, eroding what time had made.

Dacia slid out of bed, careful not to wake him. She pulled on a pair of cycling shorts and a t-shirt, watching him, wary of his powerful need. She went to the kitchen and returned with a butcher's knife. She stood over him, remembering the Gabriel who had wanted no more than to know her, wondering what had made him change. Or had the



desire to possess her been there from the start? A bad seed whose blooming denied her life outside his own? The serenity on his face told her that he dreamed a different future to the one she had seen.

Whispered torments and the stench of burning filled the room. She raised the knife above her head and caught the red silhouettes that slipped along the blade. It swooped down and bit hard like some famished beast. She stepped back, unfettered, from the bed.

Choice; what right had she to abdicate that power? To let him determine his death through her? No right at all. She smiled and went to the wardrobe where she packed her things. She pulled on her trainers, hoisted the backpack and took one last look at Gabriel, tranquil, unaware of the knife that pinned the sheets to the bedframe, inches from his dreaming face.

She wheeled her bike out into the cool, neon-lit night and was surprised by the absence of fire, of screams, of blood. The city lived and thrummed with the energy of countless possibilities. Now that she knew who she was, she could be whoever she chose to be. She made her choice. □

❶ *Mike O'Driscoll ran a video rental store for five years and spent many long hours watching films that were sometimes good, and sometimes Godawful. The experience has not left him unscathed. He now talks at blistering speed about Hong Kong / spaghetti / gangster / zombie/carry-on films and denies accusations of plundering the work of other, more talented people. His wildly animated gesticulations are much admired and commented on, and though he has never been to Cannes, let alone won the Palme d'Or, he has had stories published in many magazines and anthologies.*

❶ *Nicholas Royle's second novel, Saxophone Dreams, should be out about now as a paperback original in Penguin's mainstream list. He edited the award-winning Darklands anthologies, and is also editing Book of Dreams (Serpent's Tail, possible publication late 96), a collection of writers' dreams. His story 'The Matter of the Heart' begins on page 4.*

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# Bullets and Airplanes

Jeff VanderMeer

## Introduction

I wasn't always a recluse. I wasn't even confined to this apartment. (There are 3,400 dots on the wallpaper.) No one delivered groceries to me on a weekly basis. And I had a lot of friends. Really, I did.

So how did I come to this sorry state at the age of 27? In a word, statistics.

No messy breakdown. No paralysis of the limbs. No discovery of religion. No birth defects of any kind.

(There are 200 springs in my bed.)

Statistics. World affairs. Affairs of the heart.

The affair of the Woman Sleeping Under the Hill.

(The walls of my room are never as close as they seem.)

## The Woman Sleeping Under the Hill

She unfolds herself from a fetal position in a cave under the hill and comes to me. There actually is a hill beside my apartment complex: a grassy knoll out of place among concrete, asphalt, neon signs. I am not certain that the woman sleeps under *my* particular hill, but then, no one can prove she *isn't* there.

She comforts me, lets me rest my head on her lap, takes care of me when I am feeling low. She never says a word beyond "Hush, it's all right." She has no accent, no harsh corners, just curves. Curves that fit the curve of my hands, my arms, my body. She strokes my hair and cradles me.

Why do I need comfort?

I could lecture you on the Twentieth Century's evils, but that would be old hat, I'm sure.

## The Terrible Weight of Statistics

The Woman told me two stories, through a friend of mine. The friend told me the two stories, but they had her taste to them, her smell.

Two stupid little stories started this whole business. (People tell me I think too much and *that* is how this whole business started, but I don't think so.)

The two stories concerned life and death.

A Confederate soldier shot a Union soldier through the testicles. The bullet pierced this poor man's balls, shattered the window of a nearby house, and lodged in the ovaries of a Southern Belle.

Two months later, the woman discovered she was pregnant. The unlikely couple married and had twelve kids, the other eleven by more conventional methods.

My friend thought this story humorous.

"His testicles," he chortled. "Talk about a shotgun wedding!" His purpling face annoyed me, as I had a less jaunty opinion.

"The bullet raped them both," I argued. "How you can find that funny is beyond me."

My friend ignored me and told the second tale.

It concerned a husband and wife having sex in their second floor bedroom at midnight. In the midst of foreplay, his mouth suckling a breast, her hand on his cock, a plane smashed through their window. A Cessna. Twin-engine. I always said planes were unsafe.

This I found extremely funny — just the thought of the surprise on their faces, in abstract, made me laugh out loud.

*"Oh, shit, honey, there's a plane coming in the window!"*



"I'm coming dear, I'm coming!"

I wonder if All-State covered their claim.

My friend thought I was sick, sick, sick, and declined to tell me any more weird stories. Which was fine by me. I headed down to the library the next day and started looking through books of odd facts. (Did you know it rained turkey innards on Gump, Arkansas, for seven days during the summer of 1859? And, in Starke, South Dakota, over 12,000 bullfrogs overran the local barber-shop during the winter of 1970?)

Death. Heart disease, liver cancer, car accidents, plane crashes, train derailings, hurricanes, earthquakes, war, lightning strikes — it was all there. Check out these wonderful facts from the National Institute on Drug Abuse's 1988 survey (annual deaths, mind you): Tobacco, 346,000; Alcohol, 125,000; Alcohol and Drugs, 4,000; Heroin, 4,000; Cocaine, 2,000; Marijuana, 75. (I love how neatly they separate 'alcohol' and 'drugs'.) Just a short example so I don't bore you to death. (Bored to Death, 6 — all in Kansas.)

It was then that I began to withdraw from the world. Every time I drove, ate something, or took the bus, there was a statistical chance I'd die. Every time a plane passed overhead, I'd repeat a litany of *wind shear, terrorists, pilot error*.

Think about it.

## Love (and Sex)

I used to masturbate a lot.

Then I met Clara.

Now I masturbate her a lot.

Oh, sure, we make love too — at least four times a week, all at my place (of course) — but I'm always thinking about the Woman Sleeping Under the Hill. While we're grunting and groaning and getting all sweaty, I'm thinking about the woman. Can other people see her? How did she get under the hill? Maybe she's some project on cryogenic sleep the CIA did in the '60s and forgot about. Maybe I should dig up the hill. Maybe digging up the hill would kill her. And what if she wasn't there — what would I do then?

Meanwhile, Clara has climaxed.

\*

"You never say you love me," Clara said on a bright summer day at the zoo. The baboons were carolling to us and the bears were showing their butts; the zoo keepers appeared to be eating animal feed when they thought no one could see them.

"Well, Clara, I don't," I replied, thinking an honest, logical answer would please her. "I love the Woman Sleeping Under the Hill."

She threw her popcorn in my face and stomped off in a huff.

Later, we made up. She promised not to get so mad when I was acting irrationally. I promised to see a psychiatrist.

## Mortality

I may have lied. I don't believe my current state of immobility can be entirely attributed to statistics. It started much earlier, when I was sixteen. I had read something appropriately existential, nasty and vomit-inducing (maybe it was Sartre's *Vomit*), and was walking to my grandparents' house when I ran into a post. Not something I do all the time. Really.

It knocked me silly for a moment, but when the moment passed, I was on my feet looking up at the offending phallic symbol, at the top of which flashed a giant AMOCO sign in red-white-blue.

What followed was like a nuclear flash — an instant of true vision.

The sign withered away. The paint crinkled and chaffed off. The metal rusted and corroded. Centuries — a millennium — of erosion took place in about two seconds.

In the end, there was just an ocean of sand from which this pathetic, paintless, neon sign proclaiming AMOCO stuck up like the face of Ozymandius, without even the ghost of an explorer to find it. Blistering under a white dwarf of a sun. Beside the sign lay a pile of dust particles which I knew — knew like an ache in my bone marrow, deep in my bloodstream — was *me*.

When I came to, my immediate reaction was to tell the attendant to fuck off after he asked me to stop fainting around his pumps.

"In a thousand years you won't even be dust you glue-sniffing zombie child molester," I said.

"Yeah, you too," he shouted back lamely. They don't pick gas attendants for their witty repartee.

But he was right, of course. I had seen it. In far less than a thousand years I'll be dust. I don't believe in Heaven or Hell. I don't believe in reincarnation. I *certainly* don't believe in Edgar Cayce, or Mafu, the trans-time personality who spoke in Olde English on Oprah.

What's left for me?

Friends inform me I'm strange. (They come up to me and say, "Oh, by the way, you are one *strange* puppy.") They tell me that this is the only life any of us have, so we should party all the time, screw as many willing women as possible, and spend a lot of money on our friends.

I doubt any of them have read Kierkegaard. I doubt they've pored through tomes of statistics, either.

## The Head Shrinker

So I went to see a psychiatrist. His name was A.Y. Tittle and he insisted I call him Dr Tittle, or "just plain Tittle." Apparently, his first and middle names were invocations of the Devil or hideous jokes bestowed upon him by his parents. Like Asshole Yodeler, or Aardvark Yak.

Tittle called the Woman Sleeping Under the Hill a "figment of an over-stressed imagination."

"Is it at all possible," he asked, scratching his butt with his pen, "that this woman is actually a nurturing figure, like your mother?"

"No," I replied, "I doubt that."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because, doc," I said, staring into his cute but beady little eyes, "I've never had a hard-on for my mother."

This response was too direct for A.Y. and the conversation went downhill from there. He was *too* anal-retentive, if you know what I mean.

But he did try, I'll give him that. He even brought up the topic of guilt, which would have proved fruitful if I hadn't kept questioning his denial of carnal lust for his Doberman.

He tried to change the subject, asking me to tell him how I met Clara. I barked at him until he shut up.

A.Y. Tittle was a very messed up guy.

## How I Met Clara

I met Clara Mulhoney at a New Year's Eve party. I had drunk too much Scotch, too much rum, too much... Well, you get the picture. This was before I really thought everything through and confined myself to the apartment.

One moment I was leering into a friend's face and the next I was in a moving vehicle looking up from the lap of a beautiful woman (Clara) into the face of a beautiful woman (Clara).

As best Clara can reconstruct our meeting at the party, I saw her across a crowded room, noticed she wasn't wearing shoes, and leapt on her toes, pawing and kissing them before puking and falling into a stupor. For some reason Clara thought this was cute.

After that, we figured even if I picked my nose and she talked while she chewed, neither of us could really disgust the other ever again.

Ain't love grand?

## An Issues Kinda Guy

Guilt. Oh, I've felt guilty for a long time. Caught like a fly on sticky paper.

I tried to do something about it. I joined the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, Greenpeace. I joined Alcoholics Anonymous even though I wasn't alcoholic, just so I could inspire other members with tales of my heroic sobriety.

But that wasn't enough. Fat fur-clad ladies wearing too much rouge do that much. So I joined PETA: People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I walked the picket line outside animal laboratories. On either side of



me three otherwise sane people dressed in, respectively, giant bunny, puppy, and duckling suits, screamed, "DON'T EVER VIVISECT US AGAIN! BUNNY KILLERS GO HOME!"

Noble sentiments, but when the bunny started telling me about the time it had been beaten with sharpened bamboosticks, I split.

I tried the anti-nuclear movement, joined protesters who waved banners that read, YOU CAN'T HUG CHILDREN WITH NUCLEAR ARMS. Across from us stood pro-nuke children. They carried banners that read, YOU LIGHT UP MY LIFE, G.E. and NUCLEAR FAMILIES DON'T GLOW IN THE DARK. Cryptic answers, I thought. I split. Next came Greenpeace, but my rubber dinghy deflated minutes before I was to have rammed a Russian whaler.

I wanted to be a radical liberal, dammit, but the best I could do was shoot birds at George Bush when I saw him on the tube.

Now I send money to Ethiopia, confident in the knowledge that the rebels there will intercept it and at least *someone* will use it. Besides, Sally Struthers has such an honest face.

Animal rights, human rights, the environment — they're all the same. Doomed to be reduced to a single AMOCO sign in the desert.

## My Job

So I got a job. I chopped heads off dead fish for \$4.25 an hour, ten hours a day, six days a week. That was fine for a while — it kept my hands occupied and I didn't have to think about anything but the next *chop* of the gigantic cleaver.

Until the fish began to talk to me.

"Tuna," said the first talking fish before I disconnected its nervous system. "Are," said the second despite my feverish chopping, and so on, until they had explained the situation to me: "Tuna are caught using wide-load nets which also kill countless endangered dolphins and sea turtles. We are tuna fish."

I steeled my nerve and continued at the job for a week because I thought paying the rent came before dolphins.

But when the fish started singing in falsetto ("Stayin' Alive"), I hung up the chopper, threw my blood-stained apron at the boss, and fled the abattoir once and for all.

I was penniless for a week and then Uncle Harry died and left me this apartment and the sum of fifty-four thousand, nine hundred and twelve dollars and sixty-eight cents, after probate.

The money isn't much use. I can't travel — I think I've already mentioned the number of casualties caused by transportation — but I can have groceries shipped in from exotic places. Much safer.

## The Family

Uncle Harry choked to death on a tuna fish bone. I don't feel guilty. Not one bit. It's coincidence as far as I'm concerned. I was never in charge of deboning.

Uncle Harry typified the family: bigoted, red-faced, long-winded, and rich. Filthy rich, as they say.

He was in the delivery room when I was born. His first words upon seeing me were, "Good God, woman, you've given birth to a lump!" The name stuck.

"Lump," my dad used to say, slapping me on the back, "we're going to the Sudan. Lots of excitement in the Sudan right now, Lump!"

A Hemingway prototype, my father. And off we would go, as if it were preordained that any son of Daddy wouldn't learn about history second-hand, oh no — he would be part of it. Beirut. Pakistan. Brooklyn. We were there. Not always in time to witness violence, but close enough on several occasions.

Mother resembled a gourd in shape and a trombone in timbre, but I loved her about as much as a son can love a gourd. Dad farted constantly, and that was a lot of fun, let me tell you.

I will say this, they never forced me along any career lines. Perhaps they should have, because I wound up with no career at all. "Be free as a bird," they said. Eagle? Turkey? Maribou Stork?

Good, sound folk despite their flaws, so you can understand my distress when somebody blew their chartered plane out of the sky. They left all the money to dear Uncle Harry.

I was a fourteen-year-old lump at the time and probably thinking too much even then.

### The Woman Again (for Disbelievers)

In my more cynical moments, I realise it is a pretty stupid idea, a woman sleeping under a hill. King Arthur was supposed to be buried and ride out to the rescue, not some anonymous woman. But that was England. No doubt the American version is some deposed beauty queen, some fossil like Zsa Zsa Gabor.

But my lady has emerald eyes and if I look into them long enough, I can see the ocean, can hear the thunder of waves, the hiss of foam on the sand. Her nose is small, her lips full. There's a mole under her left nostril and a fiery red birthmark on her right calf. A certain maturity and wisdom has begun to crease her face.

And music! She sings as if she is an instrument herself, mournfully, magically. Often, when I wake, I find that tears are running down my face.

And I'm scared, because when the Woman comes out from under the hill, I am supposed to be cured of my malaise. I'm supposed to be able to believe in things again.

At least a little bit.

### Conclusion

Inside this apartment, I have 37 television stations, a VCR, and a CD player, with remotes for all three. I stock caviar, tripe, a variety of non-alcoholic wines. When I am feeling especially Lumpish, I can go down into the bomb shelter with Clara. We make love while pretending we're the last people on Earth (which lends urgency to our efforts).

Clara loves me, but I don't know if that is enough.

In my dreams these days, the sky darkens and the wind picks up over the hill where the

Woman lies buried. The trees on the hill are dead; their branches thrash in torment. The twigs smack against my window like stray bullets, like sudden airplanes.

When the Woman comes to me, she is so old it hurts to watch her approach, knowing what she once was. Her bones are brittle as the bones of birds, her skin slack, her back bent. Her eyes are stark white, the pupils bleeding away, and when she sings it is like crows cawing. As I comfort her — gently take her arm, support her weight — I realise there will be no bullets, no airplanes, for me.

Just a slow plodding forward into night. □

● *Jeff VanderMeer's fiction has been widely published in the States as well as in several British magazines like BBR, Works and Grottesque. Recently he edited (with Luke O'Grady) 'Into the Gray', volume one of the anthology series Leviathan, available in Britain from the NSFA. Jeff lives in Tallahassee, Florida. 'Bullets and Airplanes' originally appeared in the American magazine Aberations.*

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# Chemical Dreams

Ceri Jordan

**T**he wind is from the west today. There will be chemical dreams.

I risked my life walking the road verges on my way through Pentrefynnan, avoiding the high narrow footpath cut into the rock above with its rusting iron handrails and scattering of hawthorn blossoms. Up there I would meet someone — Old Evans perhaps, announcing himself from around the blind corners with that dry hacking miner's cough, or one of the frail bird-like women from the forgotten farms, politely twittering and afraid to meet my eye. And meeting them, I would not be able to stop myself pinning them against the wet viscous rock and screaming into their faces: *admit it, admit it, you dream these dark seductive dreams too...*

The road is an endless rumble of milk tankers and supermarket supply lorries, their fat round-shouldered drivers scowling confusion at the sight of a human being; but on the blind corner of the final twist below Pen Cae Cader, you can jump the dank crumbling stile into the fields and the dying farms are spread out below you in all their blasted glory. The sheep huddle in hollows, up to their greasy withers in mud; the early corn is pale and intermittent across rutted fields, and tractors move in slow motion among the thorns.

When the wind is easterly, the air is full of salt. The sea is a brief brisk walk from here, a flat slate-coloured expanse below cliffs hurled at vertiginous angles by endless storms or long-forgotten wars. I've never seen another human being upon the beach there, though sometimes a disconsolate labrador will appear on the rocks and watch me with sad strange eyes.

It occurs to me occasionally that one of us is probably dreaming the other. I try not to wonder which.

I found an arrowhead on the beach once, below the lumpen unimpressive ruins of a castle taken by this Edward or that: so badly rusted as to be almost transparent, honey-combed with destruction. When I held it up to the hazy smear of sun above the cliff, it glowed like a live coal, and I dropped it and could not find it again. That was before I moved here, of course, before the dreaming.

Yes. When the wind is from the west...

**I** came here for a week after the baby died. My mother paid for the cottage, and drove me down here; a thin autumn twilight through high hedges, and the rattle of my unsecured walking boots in the boot. We spoke very little. She had wanted me to 'do the sensible thing' anyway. All that drive her remembered low tired complaints buzzed like a trapped wasp in the hollow space behind my eyes: *fatherless child, what kind of life, throwing away your youth...* But unloading the car in the last yellow daylight she smiled and made me promise to phone every day, and if she wondered what a brooding woman would do out here in the raw damp isolation, she did not show it.

And I haven't spoken to her now for months. Outside the dreaming.

**Y**ou don't see the factories until you reach the top of the peak, sweaty and gasping like a failed lover, and look down across the flat plains outside Bronwerdd to their endless columns of pale amber steam. But when the wind is westerly you can smell them fifteen miles away; the dull nauseous



stink of canned meat and stale milk, and from the third factory...

The third factory.

I'm an incomer, of course. No one divulges their secrets to me. You hear the whispers in the post office queue: *English, immigrant*—or worst of all, the sickly euphemism: *from away*. *She's from away, how could she understand..?*

But incomer or no, I have never found a single person who would admit to working in the third factory.

When Emily died...

But no, that's not what matters. There were tears, of course, and recriminations and nights spent screaming abuse at the empty heavens or huddling on the hearth rug watching the fading embers and choking on the permanent lump in my throat. But that's not what matters.

What matters is the dreams.

I'd been in the cottage almost a whole day when the wind changed.

Sunset turned the fields to beaten gold, and I went out to fetch in the coal. Sniffed at the stale fetid wind and remembered passing the factory gates on the way here, and might have laughed at the irony if the lump had let me. *Healthy country air, mother?*

Then I turned round and Jonny was there.

Exactly as I had seen him last — what, six months earlier? He'd just had his ear pierced, and sat in the coffee shop slurping cappuccino and whimpering about the pain. His shirt was open at the neck, his eyes bright with passion and fear. After three coffees I told him that it was over, that I wasn't coming back, and he shrugged and pulled faces and hailed me a cab on Princes Street, and we kissed goodbye like old friends.

The wind tugged the back door open, and I regarded Jonny's ghost in the pale electric glimmer and could think of nothing to say.

His lips moved, but the wind swept his apologies away.

And then the garden was empty, and the dropped scuttle spilled coal over my boots, thick and crumbly and warm to the touch.

The wind blew westerly all that night.

In the kitchen, I felt my father's hand upon my shoulder, and turned to find only the shimmer of his smile fading in the still air, the faint scent of his pipe in the smoke curling from the cracked stove. When I rang my mother, I said nothing. And wondered how much she sensed in the silences between my platitudes.

Returning from the phone box, the dream-ing hit me like a runaway truck.

I saw children I had played with twenty years ago laughing at me from the hedgerows, heard long forgotten invitations to dinners and dances and things less tangible ringing back at me from the wet glossy tarmac. Swallows cried in the eaves of houses long demolished, children laughed and paddled in streams now thick with acid and detergents, Jonny sang to me as he had sung under my window the night we first met, drunk and delirious with desire...

And I was afraid.

The bedroom curtains flapped like live things though the windows were nailed shut, and undressing I shivered and rubbed my hands together in the mean light of the 40w bulb. I saw the flickering fading creatures in the mirror, like pictures flicked through in a book, searching: relatives, lovers, strangers, friends. Then Jonny was there, and when I asked him if I was going mad he laughed silently and touched my hand, and he was warm. Solid. Real.

I woke in the night with Emily cradled against my sagging breasts, to the quick soothing rhythm of her feeding and the flutter of her heart, and I wept like a child.

The wind had changed by morning, but I understood.

The wind is strong today, and approaching the peak I already feel the low uneven weight under my belt and begin to smile. I remember this dull discomfort. I am dreaming that I am pregnant again. Energy glows through me. Jonny will be waiting on the peak, where the sweet cloying scent of the third factory is strongest, and he will laugh silently and kiss my hands to warm

them, and if I wish it he will tumble me in the grass and take me from behind among the hawthorns, sweaty and giggling, heedless of the traffic roar below and the bemused staring sheep. And within it all, our Emily is growing. I feel her heart beat in time with mine, and smile.

Whistles scream the lunch-hour in unison at the cheese factory and the meat factory. No whistles ever blow at the third factory. The wind spirals steam up into the broken clouds, infecting the heavens with mad, sweet dreams. □

❶ *Ceri Jordan, writer, theatre practitioner and general rogue and vagabond, lives in mid-Wales. Her fiction crops up in all kinds of odd places, and she is currently co-creating a mini-series, Server80, for Ballistic Comics.*

❶ *Don Webb's last story for TTA was the wonderful, extremely well-liked 'Other: Please Explain' in issue 4. 'Cabin' was actually accepted at the same time, so apologies to Don for the unusually long delay in publication. Hope he accepts my feeble excuse and sends more fiction our way soon. Don lives in Austin, Texas.*

# Cabin

## Don Webb

The metaphors stacked outside of his cabin like cordwood. The Preacher disapproves — sighting the metaphor stack he turns in shame. The Preacher goes to the pink stucco pagoda behind the cabin, rings the bell loudly to attract the ancestral spirits.

He enters the pagoda and bows thrice to the ideogram *tien* sign of Heaven. From his deep Preacher pockets pulls forth little moki cakes and corn relish the former wrapped in napkins the latter in a Mason jar. The Preacher makes an offering to the erring man's ancestors that they might look the other way and not gossip about his waywardness in rarefied ectoplasmic whispers and ghostly nudges.

The Preacher leaves the pagoda. Walks widdershins about the cabin and as a final insult hurls a pebble upon its green composition shingle roof. A crow flies away.

The Preacher leaves for his home safe from the wilderness.

It is day. Then night. Then it is day again.

The marshal arrives on a grey gelding and his deputy close as an appositive rides behind. They hitch their horses at the post and then knock very official on the cabin door.

A thin unsnatched almost ghoul-white face at the door.

— Whaddya want?

— We [the marshal and deputy speak in chorus as in a Greek play] understand that you've been practising poetry at this here cabin.

— Whaduv it?

— Gotta license?

— Curses. Foylet again.

The marshal the deputy the prisoner depart. Inside through the cabin's open door the sound of rapid typing is heard.

The prisoner's character — albeit a bit flat with the criminal traits emphasised — is maintained all the way to the jail.

The writer pauses leaves the cabin. He inspects the metaphors.

"Better lay in some more. It'll be a long winter." □



# Another Friend

Chris Kenworthy

I used to collect door hinges, because they looked like fat metal butterflies. At first I gathered them from mottled glass jars and tins from my mother's money drawer. They were short and squat, and they moved stiffly. When I put lard on the joints, the wings flapped with a slick movement.

More hinges appeared in junked drawers in the garden shed. I arranged them in a line on the garden wall; seven were black and slightly yellow, six more were the colour of rust.

The trouble started when I unscrewed the doors of my wardrobe. I was rewarded with four new, shining butterflies, but the wardrobe was ruined, and I had to lean the doors against its wooden frame. My theft was discovered the next morning when, forgetting what I had done, I yanked at the handle, rushing for a school shirt, and the door flew off the wardrobe and onto my head. The noise brought my parents rushing upstairs. My hinges were confiscated; four were screwed back into place, and the others were thrown on the fire. I had to clean out the grate, dirty with warm ash and heavy with solid, burnt angles of metal. Each one made a thudding sound as it fell off the shovel and into the bin.

The memory came back to me a few weeks ago when I was dismantling Suzanne's furniture. When I unscrewed the hinges of her ancient wardrobe, I felt that I was setting free a new host of insects. Their bodies were thicker than I was used to, but I was still sure they could fly.

The sound of metal had first attracted me to Suzanne. We were in the Brucciani's cafe, strangers sharing a round table because it was too busy to sit alone. I was reading a novel, glancing around the place, but Suz-

anne was simply staring at her coffee. She dipped her spoon in, sucked it, then clattered it on her teeth. She did this three times, then saw that I was watching. She repeated it once more, this time rattling it for a while longer, looking at me briefly. "I'm tasting my spoon," she said, putting it back in her saucer.

"I'm sorry for staring."

"That's all right."

"It reminded me of something, that's all."

She nodded. "The taste reminded me of blood."

We met several times that week, and she borrowed my novel. I hadn't actually finished it, but pretended to have done when she seemed keen on reading it. I read the last chapters in the library before we met again.

We went to the park twice, to share food and drink, and then she took me back to her town flat. We had never kissed and when we went to bed, it immediately went wrong. I felt as though I was following an instruction manual — touching all the right places in a set order. Suzanne was silent, breathing through her nose, barely moving.

When I put my mouth between her legs it tasted different, like copper coins. She was bleeding and I pulled away.

"I think you've come on," I said, touching my tongue onto my bottom lip.

Suzanne lifted her head. "It feels richer. You don't mind do you?" She shook her head as if to answer my question. "Wipe your mouth and carry on."

I pulled myself around and we made love in the conventional position.

I remembered an image of the bookcase.

When I was about twelve, I began asking my parents about a long room lined with old books. I remembered that they were wired

into the walls to protect them. The window looked out over a frosted lawn, leading down to Scotts pine, their spines white with ice, and behind, the low sun setting watery yellow.

I could remember little more than this; only that I was in the room with somebody, and we were sad about something. Her father might have been in the next room.

Nobody knew what the memories could be, nobody recognised the place I described. My family became familiar with all the details as I repeated them, but they were certain I had never been there.

Dad suggested that I might have dreamt it.

My mother said it may yet happen.

When I told Suzanne she said, "It sounds like our house. Where my father lives, out in Herefordshire. I'll take you over some time."

I expected her to be upset that I had been thinking about this during our first night together, but she sat up in bed, twirling the ends of her hair, and said, "I was just thinking about that place anyway."

It had gone dark outside but the streetlight shone on her hair like it was made out of soft glass.

We didn't go to Herefordshire for a long time. Towards the end of the autumn, when the trees outside my room were becoming bare, Suzanne and I decided to move in together. We found a decent sized house on the edge of town. It was cold and white but I imagined all the warm things we could bring to it. I owned several brass candlesticks which I quickly saw places for. The kitchen window looked down the hill and over the flat fields, where the river wound past the south side of town.

Suzanne said, "I want to bring the furniture from Dad's house. I have some cupboards and wardrobes, and small tables. A bed too. There should be enough room."

I borrowed my friend's red delivery van, and we drove down the M6 and through the hills of Shropshire. It was late when we arrived, but her father had left the row of lights on along his gravel path. The house itself had three stories; one window in each was burning — all had blue curtains, but the light appeared to come from red lampshades.

He met us in the hall and shook my hand. His face was severe and he slowly rubbed one hand back over his bald head. After a brief supper of cheese and crackers, with glasses of water, he showed us to our room.

When he had gone Suzanne said, "This is smaller than my own room, but at least it has a double bed."

We spent the next day dismantling furniture and loading it into the van, while her Dad went into Telford for a load of wax.

When we had loaded the last of the miniature tables, Suzanne stopped and said, "I'll take you to the room now. There's a wardrobe we should be able to get down. Dad won't miss it. And you can see if it's the same place you remember."

The library was similar to the one I had seen; thin enough to touch the books on either wall, long, with one tall window. I ran my fingers down the wire on the shelves, and looked out at the lawn and the trees.

"This is the place. But the time is wrong." The weather pulled dark clouds fast through the sky. "It's not right, it wasn't like this."

"Well, anyway," Suzanne said, swinging the doors of her wardrobe at the opposite end of the room. We took it to pieces and carried it down to the van. The doors felt cold when I slammed them for the last time.

"Should we wait for him?" I asked.

"No, let's just get back with the stuff."

Wind rocked the van as we drove over bridges and hills.

Our first night in the flat was freezing. We had painted the window frames blue during the afternoon, while it was warm. Before they had dried the wind changed direction, blowing in cold.

"If we shut them now, they'll be painted shut," Suzanne said, gently kicking the skirting board.

The candles we lit for warmth were soon blown out. I suggested we spend the night at my flat, while I still had access to it. We could take sleeping bags over.

"I'm not going back there," she said. "This is where we live."

Two days later I walked into town when it was raining. I saw Ruth standing outside



Brucciani's with a newspaper over her head. It was sodden and dark. She looked as though she was waiting for me. I greeted her and we decided to go inside.

We ordered a coffee each. The room smelt hot, musty people drying off. Umbrellas pooled water around themselves, and hands were wrapped around cups. We sat at the back by the frosted windows, the stained glass casting cream light onto her face.

We talked about what had gone before, and how it had all ended.

Two years ago we spent three weeks together, travelling the country in her battered Mazda. When we came home, we split up; she gave no reason other than, "I just don't want to anymore."

In the cafe her face looked smooth again.

"You looked like this before anything went wrong."

Her smile rose a little, and she ran her fingers along the edge of the table.

She said, "I remember all that happened. Those moments. Just falling out. It feels like I'm being cooked too slowly."

I tasted my drink and it hurt, turning my fillings cold.

Ruth lifted her hand and showed me a dark scar across her knuckles.

"Trapped my hand in the car door. Couldn't get away. But it's getting better now."

This reminded me of the stories she told to comfort me. When I was crying, she said that every time a knife cuts you, it gets a little more blunt. This made sense at the time, but that afternoon I passed a reeking butcher's shop. They were gristling and hacking through raw bodies. The knives made a terrible mess without growing blunt. When I passed again at five o'clock, the butcher was wiping surfaces, while the apprentice sharpened the blades. It had taken all day for the edge to dull, and now they were making it thin again.

I held her hand briefly, and felt the warmth in her scar.

"Does it still hurt?"

"The pain has gone, mostly. But I can still remember the instant they were crushed. I can't get away from that moment."

My coffee soured as it cooled and we left without ordering another. It was still raining and shop lights glared and broke up in the puddles. We said goodbye, making no arrangement to meet again.

The rain eased as I approached the flat. I climbed the stairs and saw that our door was open, although there was something different about it. As I stepped forward it was kicked, slammed shut, and locked. I heard the key being drawn out and flung across the floor.

I knocked tentatively and called her name. Objects and furniture were being hefted and broken inside. The only word I heard her grunt was 'enough'.

There was a new lock on the door; cheap brass, with splinters of wood where it had been screwed in. The metal was almost the colour of gold. I knelt down to stare through it. Suzanne was facing me, her cheeks polished. She took chewing gum from her mouth and as she bit her teeth into a foul grin, she pushed it into the key hole, blocking my view.

Walking back downstairs I felt cold, and reached into my pocket to find my old flat key. In the half-light, it was difficult to tell which was which, but there were definitely two.

Outside it was quiet and it had stopped raining. One car passed, water spraying from its tyres. Insects flew around the orange streetlight, circling, then battering into it. Their wings were wide and flat, like a moth's, and when they beat against each other, they clattered softly, as though they were made from wafers of steel. □

❶ *Chris Kenworthy has moved house eleven times in the past four years, but is now quite settled in a country cottage near Garstang. He is a full-time writer who dabbles with computer art, photography, sacred geometry, and is a well-known crop circle maker.*

❷ *Rupert Loydell (see the poem 'The Inscrutable World' on page 9) is the founder of Stride, based in Exeter and publishing poetry and experimental prose.*





# Tears of the Expressionist Aphrodite

(Selected Passages from a Transcript of the Documentary)

Mark McLaughlin

## The Poet:

I hate being called a poet. I've met too many people who think all a poet is good for is coming up with clever rhymes. I prefer to think of myself as a text-orchestrator. And as for rhyme: it's only useful when you are trying to replicate the brain-wave patterns of deceased idiots. And there are other psionic applications. Orgasmic waves, for example, break down roughly into sestinas. But a poem that could drum the rhythm of life into the dead: or better yet, could inspire the dead to fuck! *That* would be something.

## The Painter:

I've been criticised for going on and on about pain and suffering. And having said that, I shall proceed to talk about pain and suffering anyway, since I know whereof I speak. They put my father behind bars for what he did, but really, he should have received an arts grant. Slamming that car door on my hands — first one, then the other — was a genius thing to do. Really. I was pissed off at the time, but now: the pain, it's all right there on the canvas. The colour theory of pain, the geometry of pain... My hands may not be the prettiest things in the world, but they get the job done.

## The Boywhore:

Yes, I used to fuck for money, but I'm beyond that now. I once thought that being

hypersensitive was a curse, but with life experience, I've gained confidence. If only *everyone* were hypersensitive! That would be nice. A world of considerate lovers... A boy can dream.

I've been working on the development of the perfect virtual reality fuck program: layering the levels. Simultaneous auto-, homo-, hetero-experience. And everything else I've ever done, or anyone else for that matter. Dildoes. Pumps. Dogs. Every possible fetish, every sex toy, every... But you get the idea.

## The Priest:

It all started when I baptised a dead man and he became a zombie. A lot of people had a problem with that. But then, a lot of people had problems with electricity, flying machines, the car... Some people still think that radio waves can filter into their brains and drive them crazy. The baptism was simply an experiment. The process — I hate the word 'ritual' — centred around a supplication to the true Aphrodite. Eventually I loaded the zombie in the car and hit the road.

This documentary surprises me: most people don't want to hear about anything that could actually bring about *change*. But I do have faith that in time, everyone will embrace the new way.

## The Historian:

Society is all screwed up. It's disgusting. I've read textbook after textbook and they're

all wrong. I can't stand reading lies, knowing that the next person to read them just might be stupid enough to believe them. Truth can be such a burden. The bigger the truth, the bigger the burden. I wish that I could be stupid, but still be able to discern the truth instinctually. Like animals in the woods: they know which plants are poisonous, don't they? I'm fairly sure they do. I'll have to ask the Scientist.

### The Scientist:

Consciousness. It's grounded in every cell. The dead ones, too: even *rot* has a sort of intellect. Biology craves a purpose.

Each cell says to itself: *I have to do something*. The stupid ones just say it slower.

That's my little joke. I shouldn't say silly things. People think less of me when I do. Like I'm not supposed to have a sense of humour. But if I didn't laugh every now and then, well, I'd probably die from ulcers and high blood pressure. My cells want me to speak my mind, and vice versa.

### The Director:

At first, I had trouble finding funds for this documentary. But when word got out — through the grapevine, articles here and there, radio interviews at ridiculously small college stations — money started trickling, then spurting, then pouring in. There are businesses and committees out there that want to see me succeed. They probably don't even *know* about the Expressionist Aphrodite, *per se*. That makes me laugh: people who don't know why they do what they do. Sure, they're probably just following their instincts, but aren't we all more than just flowers turning our petals toward the sun?

### The Poet:

At my most recent reading, I've performed my poem, *Tears of Ecstasy, Iridescent Eyes*. Each time, the entire audience was transfixed. That particular poem, that sestina, can turn the listener into a melancholy idiot. I'm

not sure why it doesn't fuck *me* up. I suppose I'm just a... Tool? Doorway? Organ? Maybe I'm a reptile: rattlesnakes manage to carry around their venom without dying. Isn't that a vile image: little old me, the text-viper, stunning the brains of my mousy listeners. Making them stare and drool and sigh with sad wonder. Some of the folks from my audiences have been fetched and detained by family members, but eventually, most have wandered back to me. For a while, I was giving some of them crackers and setting them in abandoned buildings. Posing them in amusing tableaux.

### The Painter:

Aphrodite is the inspiration for all Expressionism. At my last exhibit, everyone kept staring at *Pain Flowers*, staring and soaking in my pain. It's odd that they didn't want to leave, since they weren't having much fun. Oh no. They were all gently crying. That mindless weeping gave me a few anxiety attacks, but eventually I got used to it. Really, though, crying isn't a bad thing. Deep down, I think, we all want to need to shed a few tears. Sure we do. Isn't an orgasm a sort of bodily crying jag?

### The Boywhore:

I tried out the first draft of the fuck program on some old friends — clients, actually. It reduced them to a gritty, quivering paste. And let me tell you — it's a crazy thing, to have eyes staring at you out of pink slime, staring in an accusing sort of way. Not that it made me feel bad. I don't believe in guilt: it just holds you back, and really, who needs that? And besides, nobody died. That slime was — *is* — alive, and I've saved every ounce. If there's *anything* anyone should feel guilty for, it's waste.

### The Priest:

I've set up my own church in a little ghost town in the Midwest. Toad City. It's near a huge, swampy lake, full of critters, so that's



probably where they got the 'toad' part of the name. As for 'city': probably just wishful thinking. Or, who knows? Maybe prophecy. I happened to pass through the town during my travels with zombie #1. The place consisted of twenty broken-down buildings and a cemetery. No one was around to stop us, so the zombie and I dug up the dead people and baptised them. At the time, I didn't know what they were going to *do*. They had a complete lack of focus.

All in all, things have a way of fitting together. For me, that's an unusually optimistic statement, but what the hell. Technically, I *am* in the optimism business.

### The Historian:

Aphrodite — the real Aphrodite — was never the goddess of love. But various cultures copied her. Distorted her. *Softened* her.

In ancient times, the people of Babel worshipped the true Aphrodite. The tower legends, as the world knows them today, are all wrong: the language thing, for example. A very sloppy metaphor. Religious texts won't tell you this, but the bricks of the tower contained bits of flesh and shit and cum and other goo. But back then, they didn't have the guidance. Or the manpower. Or enough goo. So the whole project fell apart.

I tried to set the academic community straight on these points, but they never listened. Oh no. They always wanted *proof*. Information gleaned from visions simply wasn't good enough for them. I did eventually meet some sympathetic souls, and their support meant everything to me. For a while there, I was actually beginning to doubt my sanity.

### The Scientist:

I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING. I can hear my own cells crying out. Perhaps that voice is the tiny — what *would* one call the reverse of amplified? — voice of Aphrodite, goddess of Expressionism. She is not Life: she is the shadow that Life casts. And once that shad-

ow falls on you... A gorgeous feeling of pain and sadness that goes on forever. A feeling so strong, it warps the reality around it. A study needs to be done on the effects of warped reality on various plants and animals. I've got that on my 'Things to Do' list.

### The Director:

After I found my funds — or rather, they found me — the whole project came together quickly. Phone numbers were sent my way anonymously. Volunteers would stop by my house, asking if I needed anything done. I had stumbled upon something, and it began to engulf me. You wouldn't believe how much help I've received... How many *gifts*. And all the people who've wanted to sleep with me.

Regarding the six main players in this undertaking: I contacted some by correspondence, others by phone. Eventually I met them all in person. They were of different ages, social backgrounds, even countries of birth. But they all talked the same: meaning, they sounded the same, and even chose their words in the same sort of hyper way, like— Me. And they all had that long, pale face with deepset eyes. Like mine.

For that, I don't have an answer. But I do have some thoughts on the matter. Have you ever seen a jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces were shaped exactly alike? They may be the hardest to put together, but when you're finished, there's such a sense of satisfaction.

### The Poet:

I received a letter from the Priest in the Midwest. It took me a while to figure everything out — we exchanged letters for about three months — but finally, we arranged for all of my permanently dazed audience members to be spirited onto buses and out to Toad City. We had to pay off a few people, but our project had some extremely generous sponsors.

These days, I'm sharing a house here in Toad City with the Painter. We're working on some truly breathtaking collaborative projects.

## The Painter:

The Priest's letter came at a good time. I was getting quite a bit of negative publicity. Isn't it always the way? A person can work for years at their craft and no one gives a rounded fuck. But the minute people start going crazy *en masse* — ! The Priest and I found a way to have my addled art lovers corralled into vans and shipped to that little town in the Midwest.

The Poet and I have so much in common. Sometimes we start talking and before we know it, a couple of days have passed and we haven't had a bite to eat or a minute of sleep.

## The Boywhore:

The Priest invited me to move the production company out to Toad City. The fuck program operates off of an intricate headset: we had dozens manufactured, and then we hitched them to those sad cretins that the Poet and the Painter trucked in. We stood the poor things in a tank to catch the goop.

The Priest's zombies follow directions fairly well, so we taught them to mix the paste with powdered plastic to make salmon-coloured bricks. Lovely. They give slightly when you squeeze them. And they hum, too. I used to carry one of the bricks around with me, just to hear it hum. But then my hands started hurting, so I had to leave the brick in my quarters, under my pillow. My hands finally stopped hurting after these little flaps opened up on my fingertips. Now my hands can taste textures.

## The Priest:

For a while, I was writing to dozens of people: business folks and culture vultures with cheque books, and of course the Historian — we'd met back in college, and we saw eye to eye on so many points. He shared his thoughts on the Babel Tower with me and I thought: this was the missing piece in my fantastic puzzle. And so I wrote to the Poet, the Boywhore and the Painter. I'd heard about them on the TV news, and for that, I

must thank this country's marvellous electronic media.

The reborn dead have been a joy to work with. They are so good at taking orders. Some of them are beginning to show signs of actual personality, and that's good: I want them to enjoy their work, and embrace the new way with glad hearts.

## The Historian:

Well, let's see. I had been corresponding with the Priest and the Scientist: the Priest wrote to me about his little town in the Midwest, and the Scientist told me all about his friend, the Boywhore. So, first thing, I went to Toad City and shared my ideas with the Priest. The perfect combination: I had the plans, he had the manpower — or rather, corpsepower. The Priest wrote a few letters, made a few connections, and soon, we were on our way. This time, the Tower of Babel would be done right.

Society is an organism: it has to change and grow. *Evolve*. Old cells die. New senses emerge. Extraordinary.

## The Scientist:

I'd been in touch with the Historian (a brilliant man) and the Boywhore — I was one of his technical consultants. According to the Historian, the problem with the original Tower of Babel was that it was phallic. To embody the Expressionist Aphrodite, it should have been an architectural womb. A holy place.

The zombies built a magnificent temple out of the salmon-coloured bricks. The Expressionist Aphrodite is the queen bee of intellect. Upon completion, the living womb began the process of parthenogenesis. And it's still going strong.

Still, that doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels. I've always been what you'd call results-oriented. Like I said, I have some studies lined up. I'm going to begin a whole new line of research in a few weeks. By then, this lump on the side of my head will have become... Something. Maybe another brain. I've got my fingers crossed.



## The Director:

The Babel-womb continuously sprouts monsters-in-pain: the living tears of the glorious Expressionist Aphrodite. Fantastic creatures with... with just everything: hundreds of knowing eyes... swollen sex organs blossoming like giddy flowers... wagging tongues and bell-like ears and dripping, snuffling noses... sensuous hands with dozens of soft fingers. Experience nourishes them, and reality twists to accommodate their passage. I doubt that civilisation as we know it can withstand such an onslaught of *change*.

And speaking of change: I can't help but wonder what will become of me. I suppose I've been in Toad City too long. This must be how a tadpole feels. New bits keep popping out here and there, and I'm not at all sure what they're for. The Priest keeps talking about embracing the new way...

The Boywhore told me I looked sad this morning and gave me a chaste hug. It took us the better part of an hour to separate. Our flesh had grown together as he held me in his arms. □

❶ **Mark McLaughlin** is one of America's most prodigious and idiosyncratic writers. He also edits *The Urbanite* (see below).

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# The Cruel Countess

Chris Bell

I am riding a bicycle through the biggest cemetery in the world; cycling downhill, the past rushing up towards me. The last rays of the setting sun shine through the glass set into the memorial column, silhouetting row upon row of urns; sky scrolling overhead and the light behind the mullioned panes phosphorescent in its intensity.

These urns contain the ashes of victims from German concentration camps and the countries occupied during the Third Reich. The trees race by. I feel as if I am flying. The sky is dramatic. There should be music. I start to pick out the shapes of letters on the inscriptions.

Bonfires of burning leaves spice the chilly air. I feel uneasy without my Star of Solomon talisman jingling against my chest.

Almost a year ago, Opal Hush left me.

I leave the cemetery by the main gate, steering around enticingly oblique female skaters in lycra shorts and knee-protectors, hair fluttering like horse-tails. On the way back up the hill towards my flat, a fast car pulls in to the kerb and an elegant young woman at the wheel hoots her horn and beckons to me. I do not recognise her. She is dressed in black and is exceptionally pale; as though her face is thickly powdered. Her eyes are heavy, dim-lidded; like the back windows of a hearse.

"Where's the main entrance to the Ohlsdorf Cemetery?" she asks in a flustered, yet exceptionally feminine voice.

I explain that she is already there; all she needs to do is turn right. I turn my head back to her car, eager to see her striking face again. She points agitatedly in the direction of the main cemetery gate, raised eyebrows and a questioning look on her face. I nod.

Late for a funeral? As deathly as she is, it could be her own. She is as pale as the girl in the sculpture I discovered on the western edge of the cemetery — indeed, the likeness is quite disturbing.

She reminds me of Opal, too.

Winter it was, a brittle Hamburg day-break shrouded in frost and all the gravestones huddled under hibernating rhododendrons. Unexpectedly came hurtling out of the mist, dragging two figures by their hair, the statue of a woman, a grotesquely pensive woman, with a curved pattern of ice veiling her naked body.

I stopped my bike to take a closer look.

She stood on a rough pedestal in front of a spray of ferns. One of the figures she was dragging was a young boy, the other a girl. Both faces bore tortured expressions.

The sculpture radiated an emotive burden of distress and the air around me felt weighted down by it. I could not imagine what nadir of grief could have generated such a stony vision.

I had moved to Hamburg from London in December 1987. I could not take any more of Margaret Thatcher's economic miracle; characterised, for me, by standing in a snaking queue at Chiswick Post Office waiting to cash my social security cheque.

I came to live with my German girlfriend, Opal Hush, on an estate whose buildings are cracked like chunks of stale gingerbread in memory of the Royal Air Force air raids and situated on the main road to the airport. Next door is the cemetery. The estate, when built before the war, was considered to be a model. A model of what I am still not quite sure.



I had met Opal Hush about three years before. She had been the lithe, good-humoured assistant in the optician's shop where I bought some glasses during a particularly strenuous business trip. Either through vanity or absent-mindedness, I had left my own in London. My shortsightedness was worsening rapidly with each session at the computer monitor, in inverse proportion to my soaring conceit.

I remember the German exactitude of *Blickkontakt*, the shop where she worked ('Eye Contact'), the vanilla scent of her breath and the closeness of her face as she checked the frames for their fit around my ears.

"What do you think?" she asked as our eyes met.

"I think you're beautiful," I admitted.

"Perhaps you need stronger lenses after all."

For a time, life with her was as modest and straightforward as our first conversation. So much so, that I did not even notice I was living it. I took for granted that it would go on forever. Now I can't remember exactly what it was I thought we had.

I keep telling myself: no more thinking — just be there. But fate is unavoidable. It is the school timetable of life and, as it turned out, Opal Hush was just waiting for her destiny to be completed.

The streets around the Ohlsdorf Cemetery are not served by commonplace shops and stores. For a radius of a mile, one finds only tombstones, caskets and wreaths. Ordinary neighbourhoods have roadside displays of fruit and vegetables; these shops specialise in the accoutrements of Death.

Ranks of diversely clad marble headstones parade in pavement plots, decorated with a biblical abundance of quotations and pithy inscriptions. The dozens of florists deal mostly in tributes. Even the shops in the station entrance will not allow you to forget that life is a one-way ticket. My personal favourite has a sign reading: 'A funeral doesn't have to cost a fortune — DISCOUNT COFFINS HERE'.

On Sundays and the special days Germany has set aside for her dead (I cannot think of many that are set aside for the living), coachloads of old women in hats invade Ohlsdorf. They hunt for bargain caskets and inhabit the tea-rooms. Undertakers terrorise the pedestrians in their high-powered hearses.

It's a morbid place to go about the business of living, you might think, but a reassuring one if you are on your last legs, in the knowledge that there isn't far to go.

Some nights, when I am lying awake in bed, I see the cemetery gates in my mind's eye; ornately curved under a full moon.

Last year, I arrived back from a trip to Nashville that had thrown me like an unbroken stallion. On the flight I had taken a trembling pledge to give up drinking. Opal was there to greet me at Hamburg airport. I remember being overwhelmed by strange faces as the automatic doors slid open and I emerged at *Arrivals Terminal 4*. I had brought Jean-Paul Gaultier perfume for her and a bottle of duty-free Glenfarclas whisky for myself.

There would be time for abstinence, I persuaded myself, in the winter months to come.

Opal was driving. "It matures in sherry casks," I said. She was wearing one of her shortest skirts and I slid my left hand with a gentle hiss along her thigh at the traffic lights.

"How about you, Sam?" she asked. "Any danger of you maturing in the foreseeable future? A couple of years back we talked about having children. Ring any bells? What about getting married?"

I just grinned and rolled my hand over the contours into the warmth between. "What would I go and do a thing like that for? You've never done me any harm. But since you mention sex — let's go and see Antonio at Wa-Yo. I haven't had any decent sushi for weeks."

Over sushi and sake, Opal spoke her mind. "I entrusted you with my love and you lost it. I never wanted to be anything but a friend to you, to be with you sometimes; no more than that. And I didn't want you to expect any

more of me than that. I gave you love because that's what I felt for you. So we both had some of it; we shared it like friends. But you got complacent. You began to think of my love as a matter of course. And you've corrupted not only yourself with your drinking; you've corrupted my love with it, too."

She was right. I had taken her for granted; as the coming winter is betrayed by the harsh laughter of ravens in the cemetery.

It has an autumnal aspect, the cemetery, regardless of the season. Leaves fall, winter through summer. Ravens hop churlishly about the litter bins. The horizon has that half-surprised look; stillness! The scent of turned earth hangs on the air. There are bone-bare branches and cinnamon browns; crunching paths and unevenly rusted railings, blistering under black paint. Occasionally, a lost glove is to be found hanging from an ornamented railing spike, damp and forlorn.

Night and day, the silence is cracked by the desperate cacophony of sirens — ambulances on their way to and from Barmbek General Hospital. There is no music in it, only peril.

It was quite difficult to find a book about the cemetery, in spite of it being the biggest in the world. The author of a two-volume reference work in the city library had this to say about the statue of the bare-breasted woman:

*Fate*

1905

Hugo Lederer

Shell-limestone

Figure 200 cms/Pedestal 20 cms

"H. Lederer 1905"

(In folklore also known as the 'Cruel Countess')

A group consisting of three persons. 'Fate' — a goddess with bared breasts and a flowing gown — drags a youth and a girl by their hair behind her. The girl, with closed eyes, has given up the struggle; the boy, pain distorting his face, claws at the ground. This Pre-

*Raphaelite-style sculpture originally stood in its own small pavilion in the garden of the Eduard Lippert family house at 107 Harvesterhuder Weg. She came to Ohlsdorf in 1956.*

I had a vision of her journey: dragging the boy and girl behind her, all the way from Harvesterhuder Way (seven kilometres, as the crow flies) through the night; shells and limestone grating on the Tarmac, leaving a trail of coarsesand.

Lederer was also the sculptor of two large family graves at Ohlsdorf. I sought them out, but neither had the quality of 'Fate', a truly terrifying work — in spite of the goddess's unflattering Pre-Raphaelite hairstyle and flattened face, which gives the impression that she has walked many miles in the pouring rain and could use a good towel-down and blow-dry.

There were so many discoveries to make in the Ohlsdorf cemetery; the masked, bandaged eyes of the woman in relief on the Thoerl grave with its chained posts; the boy and girl sculptures at the Gaiser grave, or the prone lion guarding the Dalmann tombstone. The silvery, shredded bark on the trees, glinting in the winter sun; prismatic drops of occulting melted snow on their branches. The ornate water tower on Cordes-Allee, a forgotten turret of Mervyn Peake's crumbling Gormenghast, flickering like a candle in Time's yawn.

By now it had become a place of magic and a garden of rest; full of life, no necropolis.

At a shop full of trinkets in the part of Hamburg disparagingly referred to as 'Little Istanbul', Opal bought me a bronze talisman from a grinning Turk. It featured the five-pointed Star of Solomon, and promised to bring me wisdom, intuition and understanding — which apparently she felt I sorely needed.

I remember being quite crestfallen upon opening the little plastic bag that a complicated ritual was required before the talisman would be 'charged' with the protective qualities it was designed to emit.



I gathered a glass of water, a white candle, poured some salt into a saucer, found a white tablecloth and salvaged some sandalwood joss-sticks that had been lying in the bottom of a drawer for years.

In the living room I dragged the coffee table out into the middle of the floor and turned out the lights. Spreading the tablecloth, I placed the candle in the middle and lit it. From the candle, I lit the incense sticks. Closing my eyes, I thought for a few minutes about what I hoped to achieve with the talisman: that, in future, I would display the wisdom and the intuition to accept Opal on her terms; to be more tolerant and understanding.

The air swiftly became fogged by the cloying sweetness of the incense.

I took a pinch of salt and sifted it between my fingers into the water. For a moment, nothing happened, but then the water began to seethe with a nebulous golden light. The silence in the room turned in on itself, cresting as anticipation in my stomach.

Surprisingly, I remembered the words on the instructions that accompanied the talisman — the kind of thing (like names and phone numbers) I usually require prompting on: “With salt I bless this water, may all it touches with light be blessed, also.”

As instructed, I sprinkled the talisman with water and spoke the words: “With this holy water I bless the talisman so that, through the wisdom attained, Opal Hush and I may be happier together.”

I passed the talisman through the smoke from the joss-sticks, pronouncing the words: “With this burning incense I charge the talisman so that, intuitively, Opal Hush and I may learn to treat each other more fairly.” Finally, I passed the talisman through the candle flame, saying: “With this holy flame, I cleanse the talisman, so that Opal Hush and I may live in better mutual understanding.”

I closed my eyes and held the talisman in my right hand. After a few moments, I seemed to sense a ray of light above me, radiating in all directions. I attempted to concentrate upon it and it became a perfect sphere. Gradually, a channel of white light

extended downwards from it, meeting my head. Its energy flowed down my neck. The top of my spine filled with warmth which radiated to my throat and solar plexus. I felt strengthened by it and, because it had all been described so precisely in the instructions, not in the least sceptical about what was happening to me.

With the energy inside me, I sensed light flowing throughout my body and into the talisman in my hand. I relaxed for a moment, thinking about how blissful my life with Opal could be in future.

My body seemed to become heavier, to reconnect with the earth and the present moment. I threaded the talisman onto a leather thong and wore it to bed.

The following evening, I cycled around the cemetery's western perimeter road. The previous night there had been a force-eleven gale with gusts of up to 135-kilometres an hour. I slept through it. In its aftermath, the litter bins and gutters were full of crippled umbrellas; bent spokes and ragged fabric poking out of them. There was a pink one in a puddle on the main road that looked like a dead animal or the aftermath of a traffic accident. Dead leaves had been swept into sodden heaps. The trees looked torn and naked.

I cycled past old family vaults; felt as if I was on the surface of a ball rolling within a ball, the great curved sky caressing the earth. There was a profound tranquillity; grass and graves bathed in an uncanny light.

The silver of fall was turning to winter gold and Hamburg — garlanded in frosted leaf-mould — was nostalgically familiar. There was a yearning in its colours; all I needed now was the sound of snow underfoot and Hamburg's traditional smells (sugared almonds, liquorice, smoked fish) and I would be back in 1984 at the beginning of my relationship with Opal Hush.

The low rumble of a passing bus faded into the distance. A raven sprang like a hooded thief into the undergrowth.

Over the hilltop trudged a ragged, be-devilled figure, bent to the wind. She crossed the road in front of me.

It was the Cruel Countess. She was some way off but I could hear creaking and the shearing of limestone; the friction of straining limbs. She was alone; singing Bessie Jackson's *Shave 'Em Dry* in a croaky voice, humming the tune and weaving the mumbled lyrics in between: "I got nipples on my titties big as the end of my thumb, I got somethin' 'tween my legs'll make a dead man come."

I felt the urge to call after her: "Just tell me the truth! What's going to happen to Opal and me?" She did not acknowledge my presence and, by the time I had reached the point where she had crossed, there was no sign of her.

A little farther on was the empty limestone plinth upon which I had first seen her. Where was the wretched couple, the boy and girl?

Next Sunday, I persuaded Opal to take a walk with me. As so often, we ended up at the entrance to the cemetery. We stopped to read the blue enamelled sign at the main gate:

#### MAIN CEMETERY OHLSDORF

This 'Central Cemetery' established in 1877 – the biggest in the world – replaced the parish cemetery outside the gates of old-Hamburg. The park-like design is the work of the Cemetery's director Wilhelm Cordes. The layout was archetypal and often imitated. Otto Linne, Cordes' successor, began to create the new section in 1920, according to architectural principles. Apart from 12 chapels and the crematorium there are also mausoleums, numerous artistically designed graves and 2 museum areas. Many well known personalities are buried here.

This kingdom of the dead was ruled by trees. We savoured their fragrance and, in our aimless wandering, came upon an enormous cross of rough-hewn stone. The dead ferns at its base looked as though they were of burnished gold. Chewed by moss and crowned by leaves of ivy, the inscription carved on its transverse beam read:

"The Lord command your ways and set your hopes on Him, He will surely take care of things." J. RIEPER

Jim Rieper? The Grim Reaper? The grave looked old and uncared for. The silence was overwhelming; we could have been deep in the forest. Nothing to startle us, no passing people. I copied out the inscription and we continued north, between rhododendrons capsuled in brown where flowers had once been.

"I'm so frustrated!" said Opal suddenly, clinging to me with tears surging in her throat. "So small and unimportant. Nobody seems to give a damn about what I think. You don't even listen to me any more."

I tried to reassure her, told her not to doubt herself. To demand the right to fail and to be proud of her actions; never to look back and think, "I should have done that differently."

This was not what she wanted to hear.

The irony is that I was her biggest problem. I didn't sense it. On the contrary; I was calm, felt I could give good counsel. I was dull enough to think that perhaps the concentration of departed souls in the air was helping me; that the natural stillness made it easier for me to think clearly; that I was being soothed by the very inscriptions on the tombs. That all seems pathetic now. But I would still swear that a powerful convergence of energies occurs at this cemetery.

All she had wanted of me were the few short words I felt it unnecessary – even wasteful – to speak. Instead, I rambled on until, eventually, her grip on my arm softened. Perhaps the monotony of my voice had lulled her into equanimity.

"Where would I be without you?" I asked her, only half rhetorically.

"Probably somewhere better," said Opal, only half jokingly.

"More likely in Llandudno Junction," I replied gratefully. No more half measures.

When she hugged and held me, I thought I had achieved something; that things would again be as they had been in the old days. I loved her, and took it for granted that she knew.

It dulled the words to have to keep saying it, I thought.

Hysteria has a way of repeating itself; my pledge to stop drinking was well-meant but not well-kept. This did not go unnoticed.

"There has to be an end to it, Sam," she said, seeming to sway obscurely in the peaty mists of my consciousness. "I don't even believe I can find love for myself any more. I want to go away, not be with anybody for a while."

Before she had a chance to be with herself, Fate caught her by the hair.

I first remember her complaining about headaches while we were out Christmas shopping. I thought it was the cold. They always seemed to be at the same point at the side of her head, above her ear. Then she starting forgetting appointments and the due dates of orders she had placed at work. She would relate the same anecdote several times within the space of a day. It was unlike her; she had always been so organised.

In early January, Opal was diagnosed as having a brain tumour. Surgery was obviously risky, but the doctors rated the chances of successful removal of the non-malignant tumour as excellent.

The operation was arduous, but went well. I visited her in hospital. She was in a two-bed room with a view of the ambulances arriving at the neurological ward of the University Hospital. They had shaved her head and dressed it with an elasticated bandage. It looked like an ill-fitting ski-mask. Her eyes had sunken into a greyness that had conquered her face. She was wan and poorly nourished, as if something was eating her instead, but she smiled at me as I entered.

They had put her on morphine sulphate. It killed the post-operative pains but, in turn, caused her moods to swing precariously between euphoria and despondency.

I bought her a Sony CD Diskman and *Citizen Dan*, the complete, digitally-remixed Steely Dan collection. "Even *Here At The Western World* is on here," I said, pointing it out on the credits. We had often joked that

this song's 'skinny girl' was a cryptic reference to her.

She glowed, briefly, and kissed me dryly on the cheek.

They kept her in intensive care. After three weeks it was clear that something had gone wrong. The surgeon, one of the world authorities on cerebral tumours, told us that if they were to operate again, they would be able to remove a remnant of the tumour they had been unable to reach the first time. The dangers of anaesthetising her for longer had been too great, he said. Provided they were successful, Opal would be able to live quite normally again.

Opal was so ebullient and optimistic that there was really no discussion. She wanted an end to the uncertainty, she said and presented me with a small envelope; told me not to open it unless something happened to her.

Surgically, the second operation was successful. But then, in the weeks that followed, Opal's behaviour became increasingly strange. Her short-term memory dwindled and, although she always recognised me, she erased nurses and doctors within moments of their introduction.

Eventually, she was admitted to a closed hospital in the suburbs of Hamburg. One night, she managed to get out and was found by the police in the village, wearing her night-gown and slippers, looking for a chemist's shop.

What the medical world patronisingly refers to as 'complications' had set in.

Opal died on Monday, May 15th, while I was in Bavaria at an on-line communications conference.

We never even had a chance to talk, to say goodbye properly. The second operation had been her choice; it was what she had wanted. She went into it with her customary optimism, aware of the risks but willing to take a chance. Perhaps it was the morphine that had made her so fey.

I am ashamed to admit that my immediate grief was no more profound than that upon draining a particularly fine bottle of whiskey. Soon, though, I found myself nursing a



curious emptiness far worse than the variety of hangover that simply does not want to get better.

Death connects us, all races — it is the universal quantity.

As Opal was keen on reminding me — and I always hear the words in the voice of Joni Mitchell — “Something is lost, but something is gained in living every day”. Bereavement was a revelation to me and, without irony, I thanked Opal for another new experience.

The funeral was on a beautifully warm spring day. I arranged with the pastor for a tape to be played at the end of the service — John Martyn’s version of *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, knowing it would end in tears. As the casket left the chapel-of-rest on a conveyor belt, it wobbled alarmingly. Its movement was horribly vaudeville; like a prop in some cheesy conjuring trick.

In faltering German, I read out the paragraph that Opal had placed in the mysterious envelope, written in hospital especially for this occasion:

*“Death belongs to life as does birth. It is not life’s enemy – we must learn to treat it as a friend. Now that I am gone, I shall try to give you a sign, something unambiguous, to let you know that there is a next stop after life; and on that day you will hear from me again. I’ll wait for you all a while, somewhere close by. All is well.”*

All is well.

At the graveside my knees grew weak and I felt in danger of joining the casket. For a while I stood nearby, propped against a tree, but when some disinterested mourners began to slope off in the direction of the nearest watering-hole, I headed into the depths of the cemetery.

I found The Cruel Countess, sitting on an isolated bench in the shadows near a lake haunted by flitting butterflies. Bulrushes hushed the grazing geese. Dragonflies daubed themselves on the afternoon: some red, some blue; darting, humming to the tune of the spring. She seemed to be staring at four

fir trees in a row of diminishing height at the opposite side of the lake. She was not holding anyone by the hair; neither the boy nor the girl with the tortured expressions was anywhere to be seen.

She looked so at home on her bench that it seemed more natural to talk to her than to the mourners at Opal’s grave side; each a total stranger in their private grief.

“Where are your two young friends?”

“I am a sculpture. I am by no means obliged to answer sarcastic questions, you know.” Her voice was not as you might expect for a statue; it was warm and vaguely polyphonic, as if accompanied by a faint soprano boy choir; variations in a minor key.

“I didn’t mean to be sarcastic. I’m in mourning.”

“Death is in the nature of things. There are only a limited number of souls to go around, you know.”

“It’s funny you should mention that, I thought it might be that way. I often hear this voice when I’m shaving or showering, or caught up in insecure, destructive thoughts. It cries, in a kind of yelled whisper, *‘Let me out! Get me out of here.’* Does that make any kind of sense to you?”

The Cruel Countess crossed and uncrossed her legs, studied her non-existent wrist-watch. “I don’t find it difficult to sympathise with your prisoner. You might at least have the common courtesy of introducing yourself to me.”

“The name’s Sam Kite.”

“Fate.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

It’s not every day you bump into Fate at the cemetery.

“I’ve abandoned my search for the truth,” I added. “I am now looking for a good fantasy. Any suggestions?”

The Cruel Countess chuckled in the recesses of my Inside Head. “For the past few moments you’ve been talking to a statue. I’d say that wasn’t bad for a start. Let it come naturally, or you won’t feel the benefit.”

“May I come back and see you again?”

“I will be here. I shall decide upon whether you see me or not in due course.”

The clangour of Hamburg's Sunday morning church bells is like a summons to the service at the end of the world. Behind their accelerating cacophony, in the ululating counterpoint in the background, is the ever-distant wail of an ambulance siren. These bells lament; are never uplifting. They fill me with dread. It is the rocking of the earth, the clanging of the universe pulling itself apart.

I rise and leave. On days like these there is only one place to be in Hamburg.

The rhododendron leaves in the cemetery are rolled together like miniature Christmas tree angels; wrapped up in their wings, to protect themselves.

Lazy drivers are out in force, misusing the cemetery as a bypass, driving as recklessly as owners of high-performance cars can afford. We live too fast. We want to cram as much life into this short span of years as is humanly possible and so do not live out our few moments. The present becomes lost in the flickering of days, months, years. Decades pass and we realise that we have not lived them. Our angels remain rolled up, wrapped in their winter wings, heedless of the passing seasons.

An icy rain is falling relentlessly now.

At the West Ring, Fate has resumed her customary lookout point at the roadside. With bosom bared and gown flowing, she drags boy and girl brutally behind her, prone bodies grating over the pedestal's shells and limestone, leaving a trail of coarse sand. The boy, pain distorting his face, claws the ground; the girl, eyes closed, has succumbed to the struggle.

She has the same long hair, of course, this skinny girl, and reveals her handfuls of half-spherical breast; the same full, sensuous calves and — although her expression is exquisitely pained — her beautiful face. Because the girl being dragged across the biggest cemetery in the world is Opal Hush and she is both a prisoner of Hugo Lederer's sculpture, *Das Schicksal*, and of Fate.

"Wisdom, Intuition and Understanding," I say, and Opal Hush's sallow cheeks are pearly with raindrops as I hang my Star of

Solomon talisman around her stone-cold neck.

As the thaw extends itself to me, Hamburg's evening windows are burnished copper in the setting sun; an alloy of nostalgia and anticipation. The colossal wonder of every living day takes on the form of a gentle prayer around my heart.

In that coppering of windows lie my memories of Opal Hush. Everything can be reduced to its essence; the essence of her is coppered glass against the verdigris on Hamburg's rooftops.

Well-being never gets closer than just out of reach. I do my best to leave it there; Fate always comes when least expected. □

❶ *Chris Bell was born 1960 in Holyhead, Wales. Previously a professional musician, he played bass with the band 'Freur' (later to become 'Underworld') in concert and on British TV. He also edited the popular music publication Soundcheck. Since 1987 he has been resident in Hamburg, where he has been stage manager/lights and sound at 'The English Theatre', and responsible for opening and managing Gibson Guitars' first Artist Relations showroom on mainland Europe. He has written English song lyrics for German groups and currently works for a music publisher.*

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# The Galaxy by Torchlight

Hick Turnball

Last night I lit a fire in my bath and held a funeral for the alien. His desiccated skin, cracked and faded with age, blackened quickly under the flame. Layer upon layer of the brittle covering separated and broke apart as it burned, rising upwards in lazy spirals until finally charred shreds of it adhered to every wall tile and square foot of the ceiling as if the alien had exploded. As more and more of his body was consumed the flames burnt down through the wall of his collapsed chest and the remains of the breath of air still held captive in there gushed out and caught fire, a white hot plume that burned brightest for a moment, for a breath of a moment, before dying away, its essence all too quickly exhausted. The instant of transport, of the alien's true passing. The end, the final end.

When it was all over, when the last of the scattered fires finally died, I turned on the shower to wash the ashes away. Fragments of half-charred newsprint began to collect in the plug hole, blocking the drain. Without thinking, I stepped forward from my position in the doorway, knelt down by the bath and reached out with my hand to force the debris down and away. My shirt-sleeve was immediately soaked through by the still-running shower. I didn't care. Only when I'd cleared the blockage did I pull back my heavy, dripping arm. Its added weight tug-ged free a memory and I laid it across the palm of my other hand. That's when the grief finally hit me like a stone across my back, trapping me on my knees, crushing my chest against the side of the bath. My breath came in fits and starts and my mouth turned ash dry as I knelt in the soot-streaked, smoke-choked bathroom, remembering. Remember-

ing, as I looked down at my right arm lying across my left, the night it first cradled the alien, still slick with the glue of his making...

He arrived as a thought rent from his body by the shipwreck that stranded him here. He washed ashore in my dreams. An REM intruder breaking into my sleep, arcing down through the roof of my building, down through the ceiling of my top floor flat. He splashed down. And sometime later I awoke on the rooftop with no memory of climbing up there. As I stood on the small, flat top of the stairwell, head and shoulders above even the chimney stacks, numbers scrolled through my mind in a wholly-alien feat of mental astrometry. I (/he/we) swung around seeking out this azimuth, that declination... There. A point a hand's span above the near left corner of the roof of Paddington Green Police Station. A dark place between two stars. The way home.

The next day, Saturday, he slept and I made him a new body.

I began with a list of things I would need. A scorecard that I marked as I gathered my material. From my bathroom waste bin, used cardboard toilet roll holders. From the recycling bins on Lisson Street, bundles of newspapers. From one shop after another along the Edgware Road, wallpaper paste, varnish, a small paintbrush, balloons, condoms, Sellotape, string, Plasticine, pencils, matches. And finally from the flea market on Bell Street that flourished between frequent showers of rain, a toddler's romper suit. Skin and bone. Sinew and cartilage. The grist from which to fashion the alien a *papier mâché* shell.

I tore the newspaper to ribbons, using a ruler as a guide. I filled my washing-up bowl with the wallpaper paste and blew up one of the balloons, and one of the condoms. (I washed my mouth out afterwards. For quite some time afterwards.) Then I shaped the stretched rubber with Sellotape, binding the balloon about the middle to flatten its profile into the semblance of a torso. Similarly, I taped the knotted bottom of the condom to its side, subtly changing its inflated shape such that the protruding tip could be taken for a mole-like snub nose on the front of a slightly elongated head. If seen the way I saw it.

It took me hours to encase these two body sections in paste-dipped strips of paper, hours of moving back and forth between the head and torso, wrapping them up in recycled skin. His arms and legs I fashioned from toilet roll holders, string, Plasticine and matches while I waited for each layer of paper skin to dry. I chopped the pencils in half with a carving knife to serve as joints. On an impulse, I wetted the end of one of them with the tip of my tongue. Its crumbling wood and cold lead tasted like Primary School. I dipped a finger in the paste and brought that up to my mouth too, prolonging the sensation. Feeding the memory.

The alien awoke before I'd finished and eager to be free again, home again, he crossed over into the body I was making for him as I was putting all the pieces together. Suddenly, as I was working, his limbless torso grew heavy and began to squirm across the table top, the head twisting on its just-fitted pencil neck. The final outer layer of *papier mâché* was not yet completely dry and the alien's violent occupation of his new flesh began to crease and tear these damp strips, risking the ruin of half an hour's work. Fearful for my creation, I put my arms around him, gently holding him still. Then I picked him up and rocked him like a new-born child until he calmed. Cradling him against my chest, supporting his whole weight on one arm, I reached around with the other and wiped away the paste tears pressed out from behind his colour supplement eyes. Then I carefully

wrapped him up in his romper suit and connected up his pencil-jointed limbs — already snug inside the suit's legs and sleeves. With that he was whole, awaiting only a couple of coats of varnish to make him complete.

But before applying those finishing touches, I lifted him off his back and stood him up on his hollow legs, holding him upright for a few moments while he found his feet. Then I let go. He swayed a little then staggered forwards a few steps. I reached out, ready to catch him if he should fall but he quickly steadied himself then straightened and leant back to look up at me. Then he raised a hollow cardboard arm and saluted me with a matchstick-fingered, green Plasticine hand.

“This is called ‘japanning,’” I told him as I applied the honeyed-gold varnish. “Japan is a country. In the Pacific. The Pacific is an ocean east — and west — of here.” I was doing all the talking. The alien was watching television. Standing naked on top of a sheet of newspaper on top of the dining table watching television. There was static playing on Channel 27. Just background radiation, the heat of the galactic night. He was waiting for a sign.

When I finished the first coat I left him there on top of the table, waiting, as I fled the dizzying fumes. It was dark by then and once on the landing, I found myself heading for the roof again. A could, blue-black against a black-blue backdrop, moved ponderously across the sky behind the bland facade of Paddington Green. I sat down on the stairwell roof waiting for it to clear. Waiting to see the way home. Expecting to see it as if it were a tarmac road, its route picked out in a broken line of cats' eyes stars reflecting the headlight brilliance of the city skyline at night.

The naked alien slapped and skittered up the roof's low slope in a haze of varnish fumes just as the sky before me cleared. If need alone could have lifted him from the roof, he would have already been halfway there. The light of his longing shone from him, pressing down on my night-large eyes.

That luminous imagery struck me just as strongly and I suddenly thought of a way that I could help him. A way he could send out a message while waiting for the call on Channel 27.

I slid off the roof and dived back down into the depths of my flat, chasing after the second memory of childhood I'd shaken free that day. I found it in a drawer in the kitchen. The cheap black plastic torch that I used to illuminate my star charts with after lights out back when I was a boy with a telescope and a solitary child's passion for astronomy. Back up on the roof, the alien immediately took to the idea, snatching the torch out of my hand as soon as I'd shown him how to tap out semaphore messages with the push button key. It was child's play, quite within the capabilities of his brittle-fingered, soft-fleshed hands. He turned towards the way home and propped the torch up against his stomach — still sticky with drying lacquer. He held it in both hands and began tapping out his call for help.

*Flash, flicker, flicker. Flash, flicker, flicker...*

That first night, the second since his arrival, we stayed together on the roof, signalling until the torchlight faded, its batteries spent.

I found that I could barely stand on Sunday morning when I crawled out of bed, the legacy of a night spent on the tiles. The alien was up before me — if he had ever gone to sleep. I found him sitting in the living room reading himself in the mirror. Channel 27 was on. Playing nothing but noise. Bent crooked like an old man, I left him and staggered outdoors after some fresh milk and batteries. The eight minute round trip all but did for me and I spent the rest of the day recuperating. There was just me and the alien. It was good to have someone to talk to. I didn't know how much he already knew about me, humanity or Earth so I told him anything and everything that came to mind. Wetting my whistle with frequent glasses of water, I talked for hours, pausing only to visit the toilet to bleed off all that water at the other end. The alien watched me throughout

but I'm not sure how often he listened. I felt more observed than attended. However, I was so glad of the company that I was happy just to talk. And talk. And talk...

Sometime late in the afternoon I remembered the second coat of varnish that I'd forgotten to apply the night before. I tried to get the alien to submit to this procedure once more but he rebelled, backing away from me as I went to lift him up onto the table. Though I explained the need for this extra layer of protection he remained adamant and out of reach. I realised then that though I had made the body he now occupied, it had become solely his soon after he took up residence within it. I had been reminded that he was his own alien, not my creation. Possession is nine tenths of the law the whole universe over.

"Okay," I said, "but don't come crying to me when you get sunburn and your skin begins to peel." A backhand, grudging admission of defeat. A reflection of the static on Channel 27 patterned his cheek for a moment as he shook his head apparently in reply. A reminder of his plight, of how far he still was from being rescued despite all I had tried to do for him. Tired and bruised as I was, I knew there was no way that I could maintain the vigil with him that night. However, I didn't want to just leave him locked outside so I set up a couple of chairs by the front door, both inside and out on the landing. Standing on these, he could just about reach the mortise lock high on the door. I put the other lock on the latch and oiled the mortise until he could comfortably work it with the spare key I gave him — to be kept strung around his neck. Independence of movement to go with the independence of form I'd given him the day before — though it had taken me a whole day to recognise that fact. Now free to come and go as he pleased, at dusk he slipped out of the door wrapped up in his romper suit, the hood pulled up, and made his way to the roof.

That night I had a dream of falling. Forever.

The next morning, the third since his arrival, the alien was back once more in my living room watching Channel 27. I came



out of the bedroom to find him slumped in the corner of one of the armchairs. He was tapping the fingers of one of his hands on the armrest. An earthly gesture of impatience picked up from I don't know where. The wait was already beginning to get to him. He turned away from me when I said good morning. Even a social novice such as I could recognise that as a sign that he was in no mood for companionship. It was just as well I had to go to work.

When I got back I managed to coax the alien out of the flat before dusk with a promise to point out all the London landmarks visible from the roof. I was in no hurry to spend another evening in front of the telly filling my head with more random noise. Following the sunset that came late to our high vantage point and on through the long twilight, we waited for the arrival of the true night. When the last of the natural light finally washed away over the horizon I fished a couple of fresh batteries out of my coat pocket and stood them up on the edge of the roof in front of us and the alien was ready to begin signalling once more.

*Flash, flicker, flicker. Flash, flicker, flicker...*

It was the beginning of another night without any contact. A second that was in time to be followed by a third and a fourth and a fifth. Days of silence grew into weeks alone. And every fruitless hour of waiting and signalling took its toll on the alien. By the time the second week was drawing to a close, I could plainly see a deterioration in his physical condition. He was growing progressively more listless, less animated. Crazed patterns of striations began to appear in the shallow depths of his varnish coating, tiny stress fractures that with time became hair-line cracks. Here and there cracks converged and pale amber fragments fell off and began to collect on the floor and chairs where the alien had recently been. The newsprint thus exposed quickly faded and yellowed, becoming brittle. The alien was weathering badly.

Yet he refused every one of my increasingly desperate offers of help. Even as more and more of his single coat of varnish came

away I thought that he could still be saved if he would only let me apply a second. It took me a half dozen long, painful days of watching him decline to realise that the ruin of his outer shell was merely a reflection of the failing of the spirit within. As his substance decayed, his essence was wasting away. And all I had thought to try was to paint over the cracks.

Never once through all of this, however, did he fail to make his way, unassisted, up to the roof to tap out his message, out into the clear night sky. Across that fortnight he set many thousands of pulses of light off on the long way home. Off on the journey it was becoming increasingly apparent he would never again take himself.

I tried to keep him company on those difficult nights as much as I was able but having to get up to go to work in the morning meant that during the week at least I had to leave him soon after midnight and return to my bed. Some nights I'd be awoken by the slick sound of his key turning in the oiled lock. Soft though that noise must have really been, to my confused mind caught in the transition from sleep to waking it sounded like a wet, wrenching crash and I'd start and come fully awake, my heart pumping, my head filled with the echoes of alien memories of the shipwreck. And afterwards, I'd only slowly settle back to sleep, soothed by the gently blowing static of Channel 27.

The last day of the alien's life on Earth there was so little of his varnish coat left that the remains were like raised blisters on his cracked skin. He looked diseased. Yet he still managed to summon up the strength from somewhere to go up to the roof that evening. I didn't have the heart to join him. I think I knew what was coming but I was too much the coward to be there when the last of his spirit finally failed. I didn't even have the guts to say goodbye. I just sat in my living room, silent as I listened one final time to him struggle with the door. Then I reached for my remote and switched off the television. It took forever for the hiss of static to fade and I swear I could still hear it washing

through my head as I guiltily slipped off to sleep.

That night, that last night, I awoke from a dream of lightning to be dazzled by the glare of the torchbeam as it shone into my eyes. The alien was sitting on the end of my bed, signalling. Signalling to me. *Flicker, flash, flash. Flicker, flash, flash...* I lay awake trapped in the torchlight, its altered repeat signalling goodbye.

*Flicker, flash, flash...* The signalling went on and then, as the batteries began to fail the harsh white light began to fade to a softer yellow, softer and softer. Slowly the darkness crowded back in like the second fall of night...

When the torchlight finally died, so did the alien. And I gathered his empty shell, no heavier now than the sum of its hollow parts, up into my arms and laid him out on the dining room table. He stayed there, untouched, the whole of the next day. I didn't know what

to do with him. Then finally that evening as I sat staring at his tattered remains, I suddenly realised what it was I was looking at. I suddenly realised what it was I had made two weeks earlier. Unconscious to my actions, I had fashioned an infant Guy Fawkes. Its brief period of animation, of occupation, couldn't change the certainty of its fate. This final act had been written four hundred years before.

I stood up and went looking for some matches. □

❶ *Hick Turnball is currently doing post-Doctoral research (under a pseudonym) in the Department of Chemistry at King's College, London. He has had fiction and poetry published in various magazines and anthologies, with more forthcoming in several others.*

❷ *Norman Jope was the editor and publisher of the Memes magazine until its recent closure after ten issues.*

## Composition

Norman Jope

You try again — to bring it all together.

You watch the stars that seem one-sided — always turning blind eyes earthward, always marked with clinching sigils on their hidden faces.

The pattern is a faint disturbance — order an inflection in a language capable of total madness.

It is midnight. The night has broken into pieces,

Into black ice in a heap, containing galaxies, beneath your windowpane —

With nothing beyond it. You think what was.

That storm on Saturn — greatest of its kind? — cavorts like any tadpole in a washing bowl. It perishes.

The moon is only frostbite.

No more. You look beyond  
you polish your eyes with iron hands

Real? Abyssal.

Somewhere to be silent in.

The space is broken. Tesseract roams freely, back beside  
the nowhere stones.

# Containing Multitudes

The Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates



by Gary Couzens



There are two instinctive reactions to prolific writers. First there is the quantitative reaction (best expressed by the late Anthony Burgess), tending to regard, say, E.M. Forster (who published six novels in his lifetime, none of them in the last forty-seven years of his ninety-one-year life) as creatively costive. Many such would favour the all-encompassing Big Novel to the Jane Austen-like two inches of ivory. Then again, there is the thought that if they're written so (apparently) quickly, surely they can't be any good... can they? But prolific output and literary quality sometimes *do* go together, and Joyce Carol Oates (born 1938) is an example.

Such a list (see bibliography, which omits books of poetry, plays, essays, non-fiction, and anthologies she has edited) is daunting indeed. Certainly not every novel succeeds — to my mind *Expensive People* is a strained attempt at black comedy; *Childwold*, despite powerful passages, is incoherent; *Angel of Light* falls curiously flat — but at her best she is one of the finest writers active today.

Her novels are various: long (*Bellefleur* is nearly 300,000 words) and short (*I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, *Black Water* and *The Rise of Life on Earth* are novella-length).

Three of them form a series of pastiches of popular Victorian genres: family saga (*Bellefleur*), Gothic romance (*A Bloodmoor Romance*) and detective story (*Mysteries of Winterthurn*), with a fourth projected.

There are dramas of transgressive desire (inter-racial in *Because It is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* and *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, incestuous in *You Must Remember This* and the title novella of *A Sentimental Education*).

There are exercises in what could be called the dark side of nostalgia (*You Must Remember This* and *Foxfire*, both set in the late 1950s and early 1960s — the latter contains a very disturbing episode involving a dwarf).

*Marya: A Life*, one of her best, is semi-autobiographical. The three novels published as 'Rosamond Smith' (a name derived from that of her husband, Raymond Smith) are horror/suspense thrillers.

Although she is published as a mainstream writer, and has had short stories published in a wide variety of literary venues, she is no stranger to horror. Her fiction is often dark and violent, with a particular focus on obsessive states of mind. She has published stories in genre magazines such as *Twilight Zone* and *Omni* and anthologies like *Skin of the Soul* (edited by Lisa Tuttle, 1990) and *Metahorror* (edited by Dennis Etchison, 1992), and five times in Datlow & Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*. Certainly, stories like 'Martyrdom' (from *Metahorror*, reprinted in Datlow & Windling's *Sixth Annual Collection* and *Haunted*) can outdo almost anyone for gruesomeness. The story juxtaposes an abused woman and a laboratory rat; the ending, probably inspired by Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, is stomach-wrenching. In 1994 she was awarded a Stoker Award for continuing achievement.

A writer of horror, then. But it makes more sense to regard Oates as a writer who *uses* horror, who employs some of its devices, than a genre writer. Supernatural/fantastic events are virtually absent. (*Night-Side* and *Haunted* collect occasional exceptions; the protagonist's visions in *Son of the Morning*, one of the finest out-of-genre horror novels of the last couple of decades, have a rational explanation.) Horror in Oates derives from people's behaviour and states of mind: even bizarre events like the birth of Germaine, the heroine of *Bellefleur* (she absorbs a male twin in the womb: all that is left of him are his genitals, growing from her chest), are not impossible, however unusual they may be.

And then there is Oates's style. The opposite of generic, it is quite distinctive. At times it seems out of control, words and impressions coming in a rush, so that the reader has to go with the flow. This is particularly marked in *Bellefleur*, to the extent that Oates has to include an author's note to justify it. (Compare the opening sentence with that of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*: both are a page long, but Oates's language is chaotic, turbulent, violent — by contrast Allende's seems the epitome of authorial control.) Oates uses 'literary' devices such as stream of

consciousness (hence the occasional long sentences) and is particularly fond of the present tense, though almost always in the third person. (Even a more generic novel like *Lives of the Twins* is told in the present.) The use of pastiche as in the three 'Victorian' novels, the experiments with form (such as the short-short 'narrative fragments' collected in *The Assigination* reveal a highly literary sensibility (she is a Professor of Humanities at Princeton University).

Also there is a willingness to expand her range: her characters encompass a wide social spectrum from the proletariat (countless examples) to the brittle intellectual campus set (as in *Unholy Loves* and *American Appetites*, the latter also a courtroom drama). The protagonist of *Son of the Morning* is an evangelist preacher who is granted seven visions, each more terrifying than the last: the scene where, on live TV, he takes literally the saying 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out', is hard to shake off.

As an example, take 'Golden Gloves' (collected in *Raven's Wing*). Oates is clearly no supporter of the belief that a writer can only write about subjects she has experienced at first hand: the first half of the story follows the protagonist's boxing career before an injury brings it to an end; the rest of the story deals with his experience of becoming a father for the first time. Oates is clearly a boxing aficionado (she published a monograph, *On Boxing*, in 1987 — and the sport also features in *You Must Remember This*), but is unlikely to have participated in it for obvious reasons; also, she has herself never had children. (Autobiographical details are often misleading, at best irrelevant, but here a knowledge of them shows how successful Oates is in this story, which is utterly convincing.)

Horror there is in Oates's work aplenty, though its own distinctive blend. Her output is prodigious, and still continuing. Still only in her fifties, we can hope for much more work to come. □

❶ Next issue Gary considers the fiction of Geoff Ryman (previous authors in this series are Janette Winterson and Poppy Z. Brite).

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- 1967 *A Garden of Earthly Delights*
- 1968 *Expensive People*
- 1969 *them*
- 1971 *Wonderland*
- 1973 *Do With Me What You Will*
- 1975 *The Assassin*
- 1976 *Childwold*
- 1977 *The Triumph of the Soldier-Monks*
- 1978 *Son of the Morning*
- 1979 *Cybele: Unholy Loves*
- 1980 *Bellefleur*
- 1981 *Angel of Light*
- 1982 *A Bloodsmoor Romance*
- 1984 *Mysteries of Winterthurn*
- 1985 *Solstice*
- 1986 *Marya: A Life*
- 1987 *You Must Remember This: Lives of the Twins* (UK title *Kindred Passions* — as 'Rosamond Smith')
- 1989 *American Appetites: SoulMate* (as 'Rosamond Smith')
- 1990 *I Lock My Door Upon Myself: Because It is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart*
- 1991 *The Rise of Life on Earth*
- 1992 *Black Water: Nemesias* (as 'Rosamond Smith')
- 1993 *Boxfire: Confessions of a First Love*
- 1994 *What I Lived For*
- 1995 *Zombie*

### Short Story Collections

- 1963 *By the North Gate*
- 1966 *Upon the Sweeping Flood*
- 1970 *The Wheel of Love*
- 1972 *Marriages and Infidelities*
- 1974 *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America: The Goddess and Other Women: The Hungry Ghosts*
- 1975 *The Poisoned Kiss: The Seduction and Other Stories*
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- 1977 *Night-Side*
- 1979 *All the Good People I've Left Behind*
- 1980 *A Sentimental Education*
- 1984 *Last Days*
- 1986 *Raven's Wing*
- 1989 *The Assigination*
- 1991 *Heat*
- 1992 *Where Is Here?*
- 1994 *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*





# The Unquiet Soul

## Comment by Rick Cadger

Welcome to the first in a series of columns I'll be writing for *The Third Alternative*. The lifespan of the series has yet to be defined, but it will depend upon a number of things, editorial whim being the one that springs most readily to mind!

*The Unquiet Soul* began as a comment/review column that I was invited to write for the indie horror mag *Violent Spectres* (which has just been laid to rest by editor Adam Bradley). I was so stunned by the response that I was reluctant to let the column die with the mag. I'd like to thank Adam for starting the ball rolling, and Andy for giving me a new home in *TTA*. A few differences will be evident to veteran *Soul* readers. The review aspect of the column has been dropped. Anyone wishing to send material for me to review or mention is welcome to do so; however, reviews *per se* will appear in the appropriate places — not in *Soul* itself.

I'd like to begin with a brief(ish) visit to a favourite gripe of mine, namely the reluctance of professional publishers to give short fiction the attention it deserves. The history of fantastic fiction is, if not dominated by the short story, strongly shaped by it. The pulp sci-fi mags that first published Asimov and Heinlein introduced science fiction to a vast readership. The short work of Poe and Lovecraft has never really gone out of fashion amongst real horror devotees. Despite the current (healthy) tendency toward the softening of literary boundaries, a good deal of recognisable genre fiction is still being written, but it is having a hell of a time getting published.

The independent presses do a fine job, and I am as proud to have my work appear in

*TTA* or *BBR* as I am when it appears in *The Dark Side* or *Best New Horror*. One of the limitations of the small press is that it is pretty much a self-contained scene. Indie mags rarely get shelf space in shops, with the possible exception of the more open-minded specialist stores. Material that appears in the small press is, in a way, preaching to the converted. While this in itself is no bad thing (there is considerable satisfaction to be gleaned from the knowledge that the people who are reading our fiction are those who are most likely to enjoy it), it does mean that the potential for seducing new readers is limited. That recruiting role is best served by the major publishing houses with their glossy covers and access to magazine and book sellers' shelves.

A quick look in Smith's will turn up a dozen horror, fantasy and sci-fi titles without too much searching. These are bright, flashy publications with plenty of visual impact. They cater to fans of cult TV shows, movies, video, role-playing games — they even include cursory book reviews. The most adventurous occasionally squeeze in a small press review page (usually with the word 'fanzine' heading it). With so many dazzling pictures it almost seems that literacy is an optional quality among prospective subscribers. What you will not find defiling any of these crimson-spattered, spaceship-adorned pages is a short story. The first *TTA* reader to identify a regular, professional, UK newsstand magazine which publishes genre short stories as a matter of regular policy may claim a fiver from yours truly — I mean it.

The anthology situation is little better. Again the indies are there — Nick Royle, Chris Kenworthy and now Andy Cox — but

as far as the pros are concerned Steve Jones is left to keep the regular anthology scene alive pretty much single-handed. People like Dave Sutton and Peter Crowther also serve admirably, but Steve is the man with the real momentum behind him.

At the recent *Welcome to my Nightmare* convention (take a bow, Mike O'Driscoll and Steve Lockley), the short story was the subject of a panel discussion. The consensus was a good deal of fondness and support for the short form, with the only note of resistance coming from (surprise, surprise) a publisher.

Some of you may be sick of hearing me whine on about this. Tough. The rest of you, hopefully, will share some of my dissatisfaction with the poor-relation treatment that short fiction receives. I'd like to ask you to join me in haranguing magazines and publishers who fail to publish short fiction. *The Dark Side* for example, used to find space for a story per issue — what's changed? The part of the magazine that should give the editor the greatest reason to be proud of his publication has been abandoned. I can think of no other capacity in which genre magazines contribute anything new or original to their field of interest except the publication of fiction. To my mind, this is what separates the magazine that enjoys a symbiotic relationship with its genre from that which exists as a mere parasite, getting fat by leeching off other people's creativity.

And don't think it's just genre mags that deserve a slap. Check out the women's magazines on sale: some of them actually publish short stories. Admittedly these tales are rarely of more than puddle-depth, but at least they are there. Now, afford equal scrutiny to the growing legion of men's 'lifestyle' pose-tomes. Nary a story between 'em. So, get yer bios out and start scrawling letters to offending editors or things will get worse.

I read that professional martyr to the cause of free-speech, Salman Rushdie, was injured in a car accident recently. While I do feel a degree of sympathy for Rushdie's situation as potential fatwah participant, I find myself equally inclined to sympathise with

his aspiring executioners. Oops — was that a disapproving intake of breath?

I do regard the principle of freedom of expression as the atheist's equivalent of sacred, but it would be arrogant to insist that there can be no overriding principle from some points of view. Living in a theologically bland society like that surrounding what is left of British Christianity, it is hard for many of us to appreciate the overwhelming importance of religion to devotees of some other faiths. Rushdie must have known that he was on dangerous ground when he wrote *The Satanic Verses*, and however one tries to view the offending passages there can be little doubt that the 'insulting' claim is supported by the tone of the rest of the book. *The Satanic Verses* in many places reflects Rushdie's own bitter rejection of Islam and of faith in general, although his position on the matter varies depending upon which interview one uses as reference. The book is littered with spiteful 'digs' at the abandoned religion; the wilful consumption of 'unclean' food is depicted with feeling.

But my argument is not one of condemnation of the book — which was superbly written and a valid expression of the author's sentiments — it is an argument in favour of understanding the response the book elicited. I was unsure at first whether Rushdie's death-sentence was imposed according to some God-given, metaphorically written-in-stone Islamic law, or due to a more arbitrary edict issued by human agents, Ayatollahs or whoever. I consulted Muslim friends and discovered that it was either or both depending upon who I asked. What was made clear was that the question is academic. Either way, followers are bound to follow the law, and by doing so to submit to the will of God — the fundamental principle of Islam.

I am a reluctant yet adamant atheist, but it seems quite reasonable to me that anyone with a sincere belief in a judging deity and eternal reward or punishment is absolutely compelled to follow the rules set before them. If those rules should include the bumping-off of Mr Rushdie then we are all very sorry, but who is qualified to say which set of prin-

ciples is right and which is wrong. Is freedom of expression at any cost more acceptable than blind, unquestioning obedience to one's creator? To the genuinely open-minded might it not seem that both are valid, although mutually incompatible? Perhaps both are *invalidated* by the plea that as one is following an established principle, one isn't to blame for the consequences of one's actions. The diversity of beliefs, political, theological and philosophical is part of what makes life interesting. It is a shame that it is also the root of war and persecution.

**M**y own lack of faith extends pretty much across the whole spectrum of paranormal shenanigans — although I am eager to be proved wrong. I find it hard to accept that so many people are prepared to believe in something without proof, or even good evidence. It was, therefore, with some dismay that I witnessed a show of hands vote (during a panel discussion at the *Welcome to my Nightmare* con) which revealed that 60% of those present — presumably genre devotees — believed in ghosts. I honestly believed that we were, for the most part, rational people who chose sometimes to use the imagery of the supernatural for its aesthetic power or just plain fun-value. I took it for granted that most regarded ghoulies, ghosties and long-legged beasties as an extension of childhood fairytales, or debunked relics from the age of superstition. Silly me.

As this magazine's readers are obviously of a discerning calibre and a high order of intelligence (lick, slurp...), I would be interested to know your opinions on the matter.

**A**ctually I'd be interested to receive your views on anything at all. I'm not trying to hijack the letters page, but I would like some interaction with readers: the more the merrier. If I've said anything here that annoys or outrages you then it's all been worthwhile, and I will expect the postal recoil that is my due. If I haven't irritated you in the slightest, then I promise to try harder in future. Opinions, anecdotes, news or anything else of interest are humbly begged. I'll run

out of things to write if you don't help, and then I'll be out of a job (cue violins). You wouldn't want that to happen, would you? My address is 111 Sundon Road, Houghton Regis, Beds LU5 5NL. Use it. □

❶ *Rick Cadger's 'The Unquiet Soul' continues next issue. We also have more fiction from him coming soon.*

❷ *Michael Wilkinson lives in Castleford. His first poetry collection is due out this spring from Spout.*

## Cages

Michael Wilkinson

She lies.

Thoughts on thoughts  
fold chagrin, into ceilings, walls,  
crowds of similar faces  
moving as a sea, a fret,  
a damp flannel over eyes.

She tries to move her left arm,  
which is held by seven fathoms of ocean,  
her other arm plays minor chords  
on a fossilised piano,  
a green man kisses her navel  
The ocean looses its grip,  
becomes a thunderstorm  
thick as a river.

it rips the dress from her fingers

Thunder,  
followed by lightning,  
while as the roots of a wart,  
turns the wind,  
ends the rise of an oak,  
that falls in purple flames,  
out of which runs a man  
stripped bare,  
hair to his shoulders,  
thick and wet  
She knots the black locks around her fingers  
pulls him down upon her  
his hair changes to antlers  
that hold down her arms  
She cannot hear his scream for her sighs,  
takes in long draughts  
of cool silky air.



# Letters

from **Murray C Steward**

Zoiks! Either the gremlins have been at Sarah J Evans's biog *again*, or she's led a remarkably full and productive life for someone less than two months old! By comparison, James Miller is a grizzled veteran, but his enviably prodigious talent still belies his tender years. 'Days Away' is a strangely beautiful slice of dark fantasy which I perhaps unjustly neglected to mention when reviewing the *Last Rites* anthology.

Neil Williamson also has the often under-valued traditional storytellers' knack for drawing the reader in right from the first sentence. 'Postcards' sustained its vaguely sinister aura of mystery right to the last. I'm a sucker for 'missing persons' stories anyway, and this one reminded me of Nic Roeg's film of *Don't Look Now* — not only in the obvious similarity of the settings, but in the use of apparently innocuous details to prefigure some unspecific but inescapable fate.

'Field of Vision' worked in a similar though perhaps less subtle way. The sequence with the drunken woman on the escalator had a sordid kind of authenticity about it — I wonder if it was based on something Brian Howell actually witnessed?

Though Catherine Dean's 'Apiary' was a slight story, she packed some strong ideas and evocative imagery into it, not least when dwelling on the cruelty and twisted nightmare logic of childhood — 'the cat litter genie': brrrr! I particularly liked her description of wasps, and the character Corinne, as 'ecstasies to their anger', and the paragraph about the 'grammar of pain'. Unfortunately the overall effect was slightly dented by one or two words getting 'lost' here and there; a technical gaffe rare in TTA's pages.

Nice to see more from Jessica Anderson, too. I'm not sure if travel necessarily broadens the mind, but it seems to be contributing to Ms Anderson's artistic growth. The first few stories I read by her had a kind of clinical proficiency to them which tended to distance the reader (this reader, at any rate), but her style seems to get more relaxed and welcoming all the time. 'Miriam's Garden' created a strong sense both of location and involvement with the characters. She's also noticeably simplified the language she uses, which suited this story perfectly.

Gary Couzens's entertaining profile of Poppy Z Brite compounded my impression of her (formed mostly, I admit, from other articles and reviews) as being more like a fictionalised (self-invented?) version of a horror-story writer — like a soap opera-cum-rock video parody of Anne Rice. That said, I feel more inclined to read her books now, if only out of intensified curiosity.

David Checkley came up with some more brilliant artwork. He excels best at creating atmospheres of understated menace, exemplified by 'Giants' and especially 'Callers'. Do I remember your mentioning the idea of art portfolio collections from TTA Press?

In 'Extraordinary New Fiction', I'd say you've hit on a subtitle generic enough to tantalise the curious without being abstract to the point of meaninglessness. I hope this one will run and run... till TTA10, at least!

from **Peter Tennant**

I didn't like TTA9 as much as some past issues, but still plenty of good pieces, and besides, you can't surpass yourself every time.

Sounds like Rick Cadger had a bad experience on holiday, judging by 'Symphony'.

Good story, strong atmosphere and believable characterisation. I enjoyed it, but in retrospect it reminded me of Lisa Tuttle's story 'Bug House', which featured an insect-sum-man raping his female victim. Payback time for the distaff side of the family.

No strong feelings either way about 'The Burning Fool' by Clinton Wastling. It was a good idea and there were some nice touches, but it didn't really come alive for me and I doubt if I'll remember it in a few weeks time.

'Days Away' was a different matter entirely. James Miller is hugely talented and I loved this story of humans transformed into 'angels'. It was full of subtle effects and striking imagery, reminiscent in many ways of similar stories by Ballard. James Miller's last piece for you was excellent, and he's come a long way since then. If he goes on improving like this he obviously has a great future ahead of him.

I liked 'In' very much if memory serves correctly, but I found Brian Howell's 'Field of Vision' simply irritating, one of those pieces where the people act odd for the writer's convenience, not out of any real motivation. Lunchtime is their busiest time in cafes/restaurants. A guy who wants to take an hour over a cappuccino while he reads *War and Peace* would be about as popular as a boil on the bum. He'd get 'Can I get you something else?' every other minute (translation: either order something or bugger off and let a paying customer have the table). Most places round here have a cover charge at busy times. Perhaps it's different in London. Yeah, I'd imagine the cover charge is higher. Nit picking. If you ditch all the contrived red herrings on the lines of art mirroring life or vice versa, all you have left is a run of the mill story about a man having a vision of his own death. Not original and not interesting.

Hard on the heels of the Howell came 'Calling Her Back' by Alan Frackelton, which I thought was this issue's other low point. I liked the story initially, some fine prose and intriguing characters, but it seemed to lose its way with the guy on the doorstep. I kept waiting for some sort of sense to emerge, but it didn't happen. A pity.

Similar problems of making sense with 'Postcards', but Neil Williamson is a much stronger writer and I was willing to allow him more leeway. Plotwise, though Neil might not thank me for the comparison, it reminded me of Robert Goddard's 'Into the Blue', where the hero tries to track down a missing woman through photographs found after her disappearance. This takes a surreal turn though, and perhaps owes more to something like 'The Guinea Worm', or the Renaissance artist (his name escapes me) who built a palace to memory. Whatever, it was beautifully written and full of imagery by turns enthralling and disturbing. Just wish the ending had been more opaque.

Jessica Anderson's stuff I like a lot and 'Miriam's Garden' was very much to my taste. Strong sense of place, believable characters with credible motives, evocative prose and an effective touch of ambiguity at the end.

What else? Some excellent illustrations from David Checkley, though he might put a bit more effort into his titles. TTA's policy on artwork is proving a real winner. You've tapped into a rich vein of talent, as proved by the fact that TTA debutantes seem to be showing up all over the place lately. Any news on that portfolio publishing project you mentioned to me about a year ago now?

I was pleased that Gary Couzens didn't get in to Poppy Z Brite's life outside of writing, that long list of jobs and much quoted bit about being a gay man trapped in a female body, which is probably the new, politically correct way of saying heterosexual.

I've read the *Swamp Foetus* collection and *Drawing Blood*. I was knocked out by the short stories but found the novel disappointing. Well written, but too derivative to merit the genre transcender label. Gay sex and a few cultural buzzwords, both otherwise just another haunted house story, not so different from *The Shining* and nowhere near as good as *The Haunting of Hill House*. The big mystery, of why Terry was spared by his murdering father, was as obvious as a hole in the head.

I'm surprised Gary didn't say anything about the violence directed against women



in Brite's work, which has been remarked upon by other critics (Allen Ashley, I think). In *Swamp Foetus* this is very evident and even in the novel there's a misogynistic subplot, with Eddy in love with Zach and being treated badly by him. If I had to critique Brite's work I'd say this is one of the things about it that stands out. I wonder if a male writer dealing with similar material would be granted so much leeway.

Lastly, this quote from a newspaper:

Horror fans are snapping up a new book that stinks of rotting human flesh. The £300 special editions of *Drawing Blood* by Poppy Brite are racing off the shelves in America. Poppy said, "It was my wacky idea to make the book even more effective."

Hmm. Now you know how to get TTA mentioned in the national press!

from Eileen Shaw

TTA is a very attractive magazine, the format is nice to handle and good to read, it looks classy and the artwork is a real bonus — I hope you can manage not to deviate from the latter standard because what really puts me off a magazine is tatty, crude artwork.

I didn't feel the fiction was all that strong in TTA9 but it *did* have an overall quality that you don't often find in small press magazines. Quality-wise, I'd say it was on a par with *Metropolitan* and *Panurge* with the important qualification that the mainstream limits weren't in place, and that's to be applauded. I don't know why everybody hates the term 'slipstream' — I think it's ideal to describe material which slides between the genres. The important thing about having a non-static classification is that established genres are, in general, hostile to writers who want to capitalise on their possibilities without using their limitations. Personally I'd *never* want to write an out-and-out horror or fantasy story (though a sci-fi label wouldn't bother me quite so much) because of the iron-bound conventions that I'd have to employ. Bugger convention is what I say. Was

it Brecht who wanted to write a play with a long, angry red stripe down the middle?

The genres are fine for those who need straitjackets. Some of us want to go a little deeper, that's all, and it *is* deeper. There's a depth to some of the material in TTA that gives me hope. I liked the economic mystery of Alan Frackelton's 'Calling Her Back', and Jessica Anderson's 'Miriam's Garden' for its sensuous language, though it did balance precariously between sentiment and romance. More immediately entertaining was Rick Cadger's 'Symphony', a wonderfully sweaty, sexy foray into the 'female as devouring monster' theme. One can appreciate the execution of an idea while recognising the male hang-up nestling stickily beneath. Brian Howell's 'Field of Vision' was a circular exercise in city-paranoia and psychological angst with all sorts of intriguing doppelganger echoes — I liked it, but felt there was more rather anxious over-writing in places. 'Days Away' by James Miller was predictable as a story but there were some very good visual images, as there were in 'Postcards' by Neil Williamson — not a good story, too fragmented and with little characterisation, but I couldn't fault the writing. □

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